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# Is Responsible Leadership Possible? Exploring the Experiences of Business Leaders, Educators, and Scholars

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**Abstract**

This study addresses a simple yet complex question: How can leaders come to make more responsible decisions within today's highly economized context? Using narrative inquiry, I explore the stories which leaders in academia, business, and education tell about their experiences at what I call the point of impingement—the point where, as leaders, they must make decisions while facing conflicting and opposing norms and values. Underpinning the inquiry is Kempster and Carroll's (2016) conceptualization of responsibility in leadership, and their argument that transformation toward a future in which responsible leaders address societal, ecological, and humanitarian challenges requires exploration of lived experience. As a participant researcher, I engaged in in-depth interviews with eleven participants. Their stories highlight the challenges and risks they face as leaders who consider norms and values beyond growth and profit in their decision-making. A variety of insights emerge about developing the capacity to withstand pressure at the point of impingement. Evolving over time, and as a result of learning from failure and learning humility, making responsible decisions is revealed as a complex endeavour requiring commitment, a purposeful and strategic approach, the willingness to build specific competencies, and the need for patience and temperance. Participants' stories highlight the need to reconceptualize personal notions of success and failure, and to recognize that responsibility is both an individual and collective activity requiring self-knowledge and a support system of like-minded individuals. Participants' stories also point to the possibility of exploring how and why responsibility is a critical priority for some leaders and not for others. By connecting conceptual and theoretical studies of responsible leadership and by looking through the lens of transformative learning theory at the lived experiences of a sample of leaders, this study informs both scholarship and practice. Some insights reinforce existing scholarship while

others offer new dimensions to current areas of study. Still others offer to leaders an opportunity to consider individual practice, to educators the possibility of new curricular and pedagogical approaches, and to researchers new avenues for further inquiry.

***Keywords:***

Decision-making, ethics, narrative inquiry,  responsible leadership, society, stakeholders.

## Summary for Lay Audience

This study is about the stories leaders in academia, business, and education tell about making decisions while facing conflicting and opposing norms and values. A variety of insights emerge about how decision-makers develop the capacity to withstand the pressures they experience while attempting to serve the interests of stakeholders and society at the same time as being efficient, effective, profitable, and productive. Stories of learning from failure and learning humility emerge as does the need to be prepared, purposeful, strategic, and willing to build specific competencies. Participants' stories highlight the need for leaders to rethink what success and failure mean to them, and to recognize that responsibility is both an individual and collective activity requiring self-knowledge and a support system of like-minded individuals. Participants' stories also point to the possibility of exploring how and why responsibility is a critical priority for some leaders and not for others. This study informs both scholarship and practice. Some insights reinforce existing scholarship while others offer new dimensions to current areas of study. Still others offer to leaders an opportunity to consider individual practice, to educators the possibility of new curricular and pedagogical approaches, and to researchers new avenues for further inquiry.

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# Preface

## The Gift of Story

"Writing is a process of discovery. The researcher's self-knowledge and knowledge of the topic develops through experimentation with point of view, tone, texture, sequencing, and metaphor" (Richardson, 2003, p. 523). Embracing the position that we can "know something without claiming to know everything" (p. 523), I begin by sharing stories co-created with research participants and presented in verse. The stories illustrate how participants continue the process of making meaning from their experiences of being responsible in their decision-making.

I hope readers will join me in finding "a place or way of seeing through participating" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 277), recognizing that how we interpret or come to understand the verses reflects how we "experience the experience of others" (Rankin, 2018, p. 55). Perhaps these stories will encourage others to reflect and write a story or a verse of their experiences being responsible—engaging as I have here in experimental writing, not worried about "getting it right, only getting it differently contoured and nuanced," (Richardson, 2003, p. 521). Perhaps by engaging in this manner, readers will consider the consequences given how they shape our understanding of what we have experienced and who we are (Dewey, 1938). In 2013, Rosiek called for an "expanded sense of responsibility in our activity of knowing" (p. 700) which to me speaks of the critical value of embracing experience and striving to make meaning from it in the pursuit of being more responsible.

**Fired in Spite**

Walked out the door, humiliated and confused.

“What did I do?” he implores.

“You are responsible for this,” he screams.

“Why didn’t you stand up for me?”

**Costly Closures**

Jobs lost; the sole employer gone.

A community in shambles, was it worth the cost?

“You are responsible” from frustration they hiss,

“You should have stopped them from doing this.”

**No Win Situation**

The power went out safely as planned.

Not an easy decision. Either way, some were damned.

“You are responsible for this,” from them I hear.

“Our homes and businesses looted and set ablaze,” voices cry out in fear.

**In a Moment, Everything Changes**

The phone rings, parents injured.

In bed, all around me, siblings cling.

I am responsible to them; it is the hand of fate.

Everything else must wait.

**The Source of Fear**

“My child is ill,” she says. “Are we safe here still?”

“Water in our pipes, our tubs and glasses can we really fill?”

I ask myself, “Are we truly responsibility for all this?”

The data and evidence, “How could we have missed?”

**What Matters?**

“The numbers matter most,” he declares.

“Employees have had it easy—allowed to just coast!”

“Tell them,” he bellows. “You are responsible to do that stuff.”

“A job here should be good enough.”

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The importance of responsibility in leadership as well as the challenges associated with it were clearly articulated in a special issue of the *Journal of Business Ethics*. At the time, Pless and Maak (2011) wrote:

> Irresponsible leadership was a primary cause of the economic crisis in 2008; thus it became clear that solving leadership issues was a long-term endeavor and that responsible (global) leadership needed to be approached on both individual and systemic levels to be effective. (p.4)

More than a decade after the economic crisis of 2008, legislation and regulation has been implemented in attempts to impose institutional controls and curb corruption (Iyer & Samociuk, 2016). Ethics courses have become ubiquitous in organizations (Matt & Wade, 2017), yet leaders continue to be identified as amongst the least trusted people in the world (Edelman, 2017; Hortensia, 2017). As well, after years of focus on the matter, the multi-billion-dollar leadership industry continues to fail in efforts to develop "good," attentive, temperate, and less callous and corrupt leaders (Hill, 2017; Kellerman, 2012). Scandals about leaders privileging themselves and their organizations are ubiquitous and the topic of innumerable news stories and case studies.

As I began my PhD in 2016, academics, think-tanks, educators, and organizations were striving to address the broad array of concerns and challenges that some were calling, at the time, a leadership crisis (Allison, et al., 2015; Campbell, Strawser, & Sellnow, 2017; Shahid, 2014). Concerns about who and what leaders prioritize, their decision-making, their ability to navigate complex ethical issues, and their apparent lack of responsibility to society and the environment were topics of debate, discussion, research, and scholarship (Martins & Lazzarin, 2020). The public, and society in general, heard about the impact of impropriety and greed through the

media, and saw it in movies and documentaries. Some members of the public were directly affected by irresponsible decisions which impacted employment, pension funds, the environment, and, occasionally, human health (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2019). Global issues, challenges and calls to focus on the common good and the needs of marginalized people in society, remained topics with which most people engaged only occasionally, given the demands of day-to-day life and an incessant focus on individualism and wealth (Brown, 2015). The actions of educational and human-rights activists like Malala Yousafzai and environmentalist Greta Thunberg, however, began to refocus attention on the implications of leaders' lack of responsibility. Thunberg's (2019) admonition of world leaders and, indeed, an entire generation at the United Nations, seems especially prescient today: "We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you?" (Thunberg, 2019, National Public Radio).

In 2020, the impact of leaders and their decisions, and the importance of responsibility in leadership, has come to the fore—and into the daily lives of most people on the planet. Headlines declare, "COVID-19 was a Leadership Test. It Came Back Negative" (Walker, 2020) and "How COVID-19 Exposes America's Crisis of Moral Leadership" (Pagitt, 2020). In a pandemic-stricken world, near ceaseless focus on growth and profit has abated to some extent as the actions and decisions of leaders around the world take on unprecedented life and death implications. As I complete this dissertation, responsible leadership is of even more consequence than it was when I began this journey four years ago.

To make clear my assumptions, I believe that while influenced by power and social context (Ahearn, 2001), those in formal and informal positions of leadership (Dugan, 2017) today retain some agency (Caldwell, 2007). Despite facing pressure to privilege economic

metrics in decision making and conform to conventional norms and values economizing human life (Brown, 2015), I believe that change and transformation is possible within systems. Not aligned with calls that "society must be dismantled" (Brown, 2019, p. 23), this present study is focused on supporting leaders who choose to shift toward making more responsible decisions. It also seeks to provide educators new insights to enrich and enhance their ability to facilitate transformative learning.

**The Research Problem**

The present study focusses at the level of the individual—the micro-level—and asks: How can leaders come to be more responsible in their decision-making? However, recognizing the complexity of engaging in research focussed on interdisciplinary and complex topics such as leadership and responsibility, I begin by situating the focus of this inquiry within a broader, multi-level context (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). While not my primary focus, societal and contextual realities—macro and meso level realities—are inextricably tied to issues of leaders' responsibility.

The need for leaders to make decisions more responsibly is a recognized challenge in today's social context (Stachowicz-Stanusch, Amann & Mangia, 2017). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic crisis of 2020, calls for leaders to act and behave more ethically and in a more socially responsible manner were commonplace (Conger & Riggio, 2007; Moreno, 2011; Global Ethics Forum, 2015; Kell, 2016; Voegtlin, 2017a). Concerns related to how and why individuals in formal and informal leadership roles continue to make irresponsible decisions which privilege the few and further marginalize the many were the subject of articles and research (Pfeffer, 2015; Muff, 2016; Stachowicz-Stanusch et al., 2017). Scholarship related to bad and toxic leaders was on the rise (Hare & Babiak, 2006; Normore & Brooks, 2016; Riera &

Iborra, 2017). Also on the rise was the number of CEO's and senior leaders in various fields who were being ousted for ethics violations (McGregor, 2019). An incessant drive for growth and an intense focus on individualism were identified as contributing factors to the global financial crisis of 2008 (Gandz et al., 2010). White-collar crime, a metric of leadership ethics, had increased so steadily (Cliff & Desilets, 2014) that in countries like the United States it was on the verge of surpassing violence, drug-related crimes, and other crimes in terms of impact on society (Berghoff & Spiekermann, 2018).

Adjectives such as "evil" continue being used to describe the harm caused by leaders not only to their organizations but to society (Jurkiewicz, 2015). The near litany of stories related to callousness, corruption, and greed, and to disappointing, disconnected, and disgraceful leadership (Molinaro, 2020) in the first decades of this century has driven some leaders to recognize the importance of adopting "a new way of thinking about doing business that accepts greater ethical obligation and more responsibility for the results of business decisions" (Wood et al., 2015, p. 19). Perhaps in response to the "plague of white-collar crime" (Goldshtein, 2015), questions about responsibility flourish. What does it mean to be responsible and to lead responsibly? To whom is a leader responsible? For what should a leader be responsible? How can focus on responsibility help make change? These questions and struggles are not new. Indeed, this topic is an old concern of philosophers (Williams, n.d.). From sacred and religious texts and myths (Case & Chavez, 2017) which set expectation on humans to act responsibly, to laws which outline ramifications for being irresponsible (Parker, 2017; Stahn, 2007), few issues have posed such a challenge and done such broad damage.

What is becoming clearer, however, is the existence of a growing paradox. While focus on responsibility in leadership has steadily intensified since the turn of the century (Doh &

Stumpf, 2005; Moody-Stuart, 2014; Richardson, 2017), the very possibility of leading responsibly is clearly a complex and significant challenge. In *The Responsible Leader: Faith in Leadership*, Forst (2009) draws on experience in education, business, and athletics to write about the challenges of responsible leadership. He contends that to be responsible as a leader, one must fundamentally "deal with how you do things, not the final outcomes" (p. 20). Although a simple premise, it highlights the paradox. How is it possible, in a context in which almost every professional activity is measured against economic outcomes, to focus on efforts which fundamentally do not align with or support established objectives and priorities?

Recognizing this paradox, I seek in the present study to inform the question of how. While much of the literature speaks to why responsible leadership matters and what being responsible could include and what it could look like, scholars such as Pless and Maak (2011) and Kempster and Carroll (2016) highlight the necessity to focus on how to make actual change—to shift from a focus on theorizing to a focus on actually supporting and fostering sustainable change in the practice of leaders. The main query for the present study, then, is how can leaders come to be more responsible in their decision-making? The following questions underpin the narrative inquiry: How do leaders come to understand responsibility in leadership? How do their stories shed light on challenges associated with responsible decision-making? How do stories elucidate the approaches leaders take to address the challenges? Finally, how have leaders interpreted—identified learnings and made meaning from—their experiences.

**Key Concepts**

The word 'responsible' is understood differently across disciplines and fields. Some contend that understanding responsibility requires focussing at all levels (individual, organization, societal) if larger-scale challenges are to be addressed (Laasch, et al., 2020).

Scholars are developing new and expanding less conventional lenses through which responsibility can be conceptualized. For example, Brigid Carroll (2016) is exploring the construct of co-responsibility looking beyond traditional leader-centric notions to "understanding leadership in relation to stakeholders and complex societal issues" (p.55). Others, noting that responsible leadership is more important than ever, are advocating for curriculum development which also focusses on what constitutes irresponsible leadership (Martins & Lazzarin, 2020). These authors contend that education must be explicit and focussed not just on what responsible leadership is but also on what it is not. The working definition of responsible in this dissertation is informed by key tenets of responsibility as they are described in the business and educational leadership literature, including the work of Kempster and Carroll (2016) and that of scholars focussed on responsible leadership. These tenets hold that leading responsibly fundamentally involves the following (which I discuss in detail in Chapter Two):

- Recognizing you have some degree of agency or choice.
- Understanding how the context in which you live, and work has impact and influence.
- Privileging others, including broader societal issues through actions, not just words.
- Reframing thinking to focus on the longer term.
- Appreciating (recognizing and respecting) the complexities involved.

For the purposes of the present study, I understand responsible leaders as persons in formal or informal positions (Dugan, 2017) who choose to see themselves as part of, or within, society (Maak & Pless, 2006a). As such, they recognize the importance of, and endeavour to move beyond, attending only to short-term, self-, and organizational interests in decision-making (Voegtlin, 2016) in order to help address societal, ecological, and humanitarian challenges (Kempster & Carroll, 2016). Responsible leaders attend to the interests of stakeholders in society

as well as to economic metrics, despite the challenges (Brown, 2019) of so doing in today's social context.

**Addressing the Call**

I believe passionately that responsible leadership and responsible decision-making matter, and that more can be done. The present study, therefore, addresses the call by Kempster and Carroll (2016) to, first, focus research on responsibility from within leadership, and, second, to address key dimensions and questions associated with responsible leadership in order to make progress. I interpret the authors asserting that responsibility should be studied as something that leaders experience or consider within the practice of leadership. As such, responsibility is part of [the act of] leading and not something that lies outside practice. The authors suggest, therefore, that we can learn about what enables or disables the manifestation of responsibility in leadership by examining the practice of leadership. Kempster and Carroll draw on Kofi Annan's perspective that a shift in thinking is needed "from value to values, from shareholders to stakeholders, and from balance sheets to balanced development" (Annan, 2002, para. 33). In fact, Kempster and Carroll (2016) argue, "It is time for the development of a new kind of business leadership. Global needs call for a revision of market capitalism and a move toward moral capitalism" (Preface). While Kempster and Carroll do not outline a plan for doing so, they emphasize that addressing the overwhelming challenges facing the world today (sustainability, climate change, and poverty, for example) requires more than what existing theories and approaches offer. Simply put, they contend that it is not enough to have theories which seek to maximize employee commitment and improve productivity, nor is it sufficient to have theories focussed on doing a better job engaging stakeholders to support growth. Responsible leadership as an emerging theoretical framework offers, they contend, "frames to examine the context,

antecedent processes, and outcomes of what enables/disables the manifestation of responsibility in the practice of leading" (p. 3), but in its current form is not sufficiently robust to accomplish the kind of transformation they envisage.

Central to the present study is Kempster and Carroll's (2016) contention that progress related to more responsible leadership requires a shift toward examining responsibility within leadership. In other words, the focus must shift away from exploring responsibility as something external to leadership, something that is thought about separately or leveraged in. They express a need to move past the discussion of exciting visions and focus instead on understanding the experience of being responsible in leadership. Change, they say, rests with leaders making a choice to do things differently. Not underestimating the challenge, Kempster and Carroll (2016) suggest that if leaders are to consider taking such a path they need to feel inspired—by the romanticism of change, and possibilities for addressing major challenges—and acquire a sense of realistic possibility about what can be done and how, and about the limits and barriers to action and change.

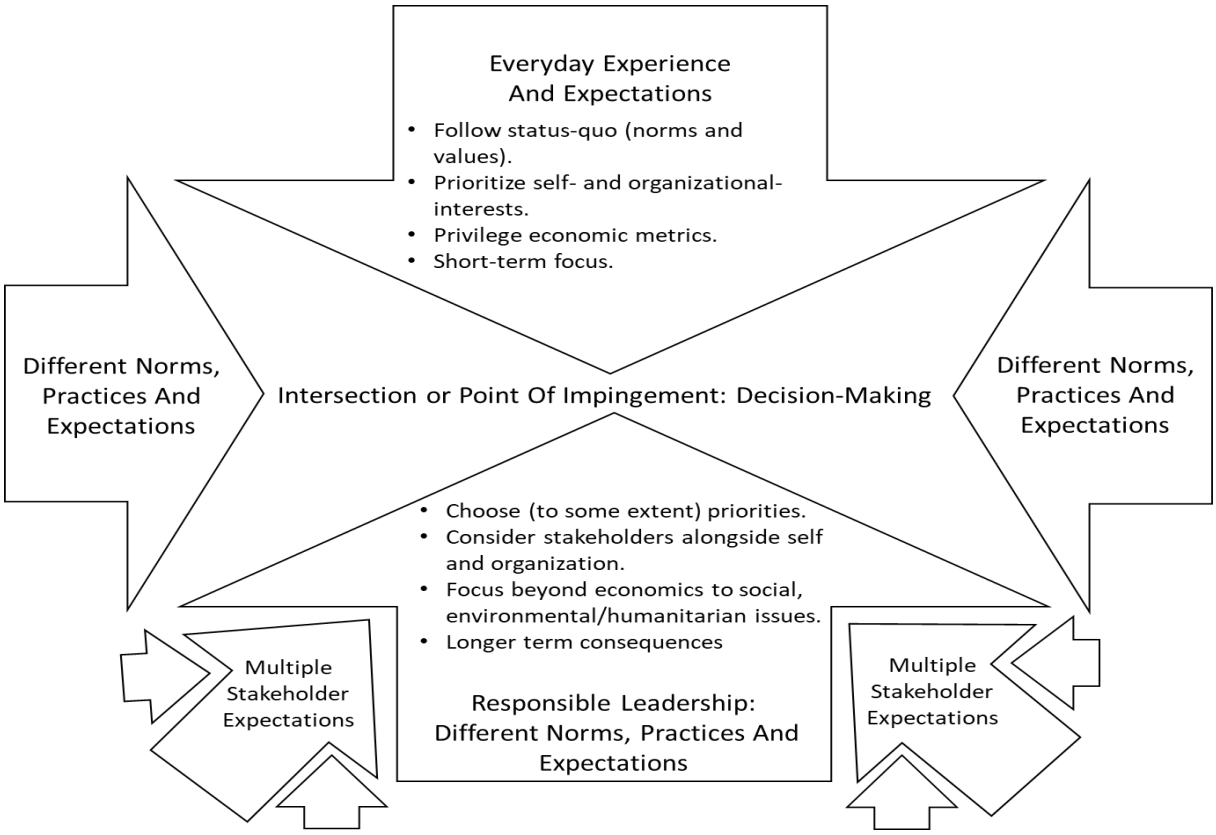
### *Studying Experience: Responsibility in Leadership*

The present study is framed around Kempster and Carroll's (2016) recommendation that progress toward more responsible leadership requires the study of responsibility from within leadership; that a gap in scholarship exists that requires research focussed on experience. Research, they argue, involves finding an "intersection between an engagement with everyday experiences and expectations, and the potentiality of very different norms, practices, and expectations with the potential to transform relationships, structures and practices" (p. 13). In Figure 1, the orientation for being responsible is placed specifically at the point of

impingement—the intersection at which leaders, required to make decisions, experience tensions as they consider different interests.

In Figure 1, expectations are shown to come from different sets of norms and values, influencing the leader from different directions. From above, the pressure pushes down, pressing towards doing that which is conventional, everyday, and broadly accepted as normal—privileging self- and organizational interests to improve growth, productivity, and profit (Brown, 2015). From the bottom, pressure pushes upward and represents a very different set of norms, practices, and expectations related to leading responsibly. Although not addressed in the present study, still other norms and values may also exert pressure on leaders. Personal and religious beliefs, for example, or norms stemming from professional associations or cultural groups may increase the tensions felt by leaders.

**Figure 1.** Conceptualizing Kempster and Carroll's Notion of Responsibility in Leadership



I envision a multitude of pressures from below, given that responsible leaders engage with various stakeholders who may all oppose broadly accepted norms and values such as organizational growth and profit but who may themselves have unique expectations. A community may, for example, be comprised of multiple socio-economic and geo-political interest groups which, collectively, might share an opposition to an organization's priorities related to a development project, but which each have unique needs and interests as well. Thus, I imagine participants at the intersection or point of impingement making decisions while facing complex pressures from different sets of expectations. For the present study, I use a narrative approach to explore their experiences through the stories they tell.

**Research Focus**

Predicated on what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call an "interest in a particular phenomenon that can be understood narratively" (p. 274), my inquiry focusses on the stories which leaders in business, education, and scholarship tell about being responsible in their professional decision-making. My use of the verb 'being' is purposeful. It speaks to intention and effort, and recognizes that the concept of responsible decision-making is highly complex and influenced by context. As a narrative inquiry, this work represents use of a methodological approach still emerging in business and leadership (Aarikka-Stenroos, 2010; Smit & Mabusela, 2019).

Eleven participants, and I as a participant researcher, engaged in the study. Participants include scholars who focus on leadership, educators focussed on responsible leadership, and business leaders whose roles explicitly call for them to consider the interests of stakeholders and society in their decision-making. Appropriate for a narrative inquiry, the data analyzed in this study are the stories shared by the participants. Drawing on Connelly & Clandinin (2006), I recognize

these stories as "portals" through which my participants "enter the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful" (p. 375). The study's findings, which inform the question of how leaders can come to be more responsible in their decision-making, stem from insights which emerge through analysis of their stories. By drawing on transformative learning theory (TLT), which describes how people use critical self-reflection to consider their beliefs and experiences, and over time how they can come to change the way they see the world (Christie, et.al., 2015), I elucidate a path intended to enable other leaders, as adult learners and as educators of leaders, to reflect on, engage with, and draw upon the shared stories for their own development. Because of the "transforming power of stories" (Atkinson, 1995, p. 3), exploring how other leaders experience making responsible decisions can create connection and possibly "illustrate that our own experience or situation in life is not unique but rather common to others and timeless as well" (p. 4). Transformation and change then become possibilities in terms of who and what leaders privilege, and how they work toward being more responsible. Recognizing how all research is personal (Patton, 2014), I acknowledge that my passion for leading responsibly reflects not only my deep regard for and curiosity about the experiences of others, but also the need to make sense of my own. Thus, I am drawn to Greene (2000) who refers to our lives in narrative form as a quest which provides the opportunity for us to engage with both our own stories and those of others in terms of process and possibilities. It is the possibility of contributing to scholarship in the field of leadership and to the practice of responsible leadership, and, most critically, the possibility of encouraging leaders to effect change by being more responsible in their decision-making, that drives my work.

## Conclusion

The present study is a narrative inquiry that explores the stories which leaders in business, education, and scholarship tell about the making of responsible decisions. My main purpose is to explore how leaders can come to make more responsible decisions. Driving the need for change in the decision-making of leaders is both the mounting cost of leaders privileging self- and organizational interests, and the opportunity for leaders to elevate the needs of stakeholders and address broader environmental, human health, and societal challenges. I base my definition of responsible decision-making on a review of leadership literature in the fields of business and education, literature specifically related to the education of leaders. Grounding my inquiry is Kempster and Carroll's (2016) call to study responsibility from within leadership; to consider challenging, unanswered questions related to achieving future leaders who are more responsible; and to explore possibilities for responsible leadership as a theoretical framework. The present study contributes to scholarship and practice by drawing on narrative inquiry to develop in-depth insights into experience. In addition, it grounds the possibility of fostering change in leaders' mindsets through education—through the sharing of experience, reflection, and critical thinking. Having made the question, Is responsible leadership possible? the title of this work, I recognize that there is no simple answer. However, I align with Caine et al. (2018) and focus on moving forward "away from dominant narratives" (p. 133) which perpetuate deficit thinking and "toward openings to imagine otherwise in dynamic and interactive ways" (p. 133). The words of former American president Theodore Roosevelt, "Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty," resonate.

**Organization of Dissertation**

Chapter Two provides a literature review of the concept of responsibility in leadership literature in the fields of business and education. Responsible leadership as a theoretical framework is examined as is transformative learning theory which informs leaders and educators of leaders about how fostering change in mindset and behaviour is possible. Because the present study is a narrative inquiry, I offer, in Chapter Three, my own story about why responsible leadership matters so deeply to me. In Chapter Four, I describe the methodology of the study itself and the analysis. The reflections and stories participants tell are presented in thematic form in Chapter Five. In Chapter Six, I discuss the insights emerging from the analysis of stories shared and the findings from the review of literature and theory in terms of the research questions. In Chapter Seven I consider limitations and offer a review along with recommendations.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Grounding

> By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest. (Confucius, 551 BC-479 BC)

A future in which leaders recognize and are willing to question conventional norms and values, consider the needs of others in decision-making, and face the complexities of making responsible decisions requires a great many things—including wisdom. Developing wisdom, however, is an age-old challenge. Ultimately, wisdom rests within individuals who, while embedded in a context and juggling multiple pressures and priorities, can still choose to reflect on experience, to grow, and to change their practices. Given that the present study involves leaders from across the globe who work cross culturally, I intentionally quote an ancient Eastern philosopher whose words highlight how the challenge of acquiring wisdom is not only age-old, but one that transcends human culture.

In Chapter Two, I situate my narrative inquiry in literature and in theory. I began my journey by exploring a multitude of what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call "conversations." Given the immensity of work related to leadership and responsibility, I ultimately heeded their advice and thought carefully about which scholarly conversations to participate in so as "to contribute to questions of social significance" (p.136). Given my academic and professional focus on leadership, responsibility, and the education of leaders, I narrowed my focus to scholarship related to responsible leadership in the fields of business and education. I also explored transformative learning theory (TLT) because it provides a valuable lens through which to consider how change in leader behaviour can take place.

As a theoretical framework, responsible leadership is concerned with creating change in how leaders engage in the world of work and society. My intent is to create or at least support change related to how leaders make decisions (Pless & Maak, 2011). My focus, then, is on transformation at the micro or individual leader level, and on change in the education of leaders (Shields, 2017; Taylor & Medina, 2013)—specifically in terms of how educators teach leaders about leadership and responsibility. A critical examination of the literature and theory in the field provides a valuable foundation upon which to situate research on this topic. I conclude the chapter by considering some of the key opportunities and challenges that remain in the quest for transformative change in how leaders lead.

## Key Tenets of Responsible Leadership

Five tenets of responsible leadership emerge from literature reviewed in the fields of business and education. The tenets are activating agency; understanding your context, privileging others, focusing on the long-term, and respecting complexity. These tenets are discussed below and are central to the definition of a responsible leader which I use in this study:

### *Activating Agency*

Responsible leadership requires individuals to act and make choices which often do not align with conventional norms and values. Thus, responsible leaders must activate their agency and make choices in situations knowing their decisions are likely to be challenged, create tension and even conflict. In the social sciences, the degree to which individuals are believed to be independent and able to make their own choices continues to be discussed and debated (Johnson, 2008). Some social scientists focus on individual agency, cognitive abilities, psychology, and experience. Other social scientists focus on social factors including class, nationality, family of origin, religion, gender, and ethnicity as key structural dimensions that limit individual choice

(Barker, 2005). As way of example, in *Undoing the Demos*, Brown (2015) describes how today's intense focus on the market and on economic forces "radically constrains and limits choice and ambition" (p.41). In discussions of agency and choice, the words 'freedom' and 'will' are often introduced. Acknowledging the epistemological challenges and debates surrounding the concept of free will, I turn to Pleasants (2018) who contends that the "so-called problem" (p. 3) of agency and structure in the social sciences is erroneous and is sustained by a lack of understanding about the central philosophical issues associated with free will and determinism.

Pleasants (2018) conducted a philosophical mapping exercise and a case analysis, then suggested that notions of agency and structure should be reconceived and examined through an empirical and interpretive lens rather than a metaphysical one. Pleasants recommends that social scientists should focus on "how, in which ways, and under which circumstances, the social-structural conditions of individuals' action impinge on their ability to act freely" (p. 26). Acknowledging that many forces, pressures, and social and individual conditions present barriers and obstacles for leaders, Pleasants, like Brown, does not preclude the possibility that individuals have a certain amount of choice.

In the present study, I stand with Pleasants and Brown in acknowledging that leaders, while socially constructed and influenced by structure and power, still have a degree of agency and ability to choose. I am also drawn to Ahearn (2001) who described individuals having "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112) meaning that while able to act, ones' choices are impacted and influenced by the environment or context in which they engage.

### *Understanding Your Context*

Responsible leadership is imbued with notions and expectations of leaders challenging conventional norms and values (Voegtlin, 2016). Thus, there is an underlying assumption that leaders currently explore the context (individual, organizational, societal) in which they live and work. Only with such an understanding can a leader gauge how context is in fact influencing their decision-making, and perhaps then consider privileging alternative norms, values and expectation in their leadership practice. While I stand with scholars who assert that context has significant impact on leader agency (Maak & Pless, 2006a, 2006b), I contend that further research is required to determine the extent to which leaders (broadly understood) are critically aware of how systemic forces are influencing their decision-making.

That said, Shields (2017) notes how understanding context is only the first step toward transformation, saying that the magnitude of change needed is impossible without calling out the power imbalances associated with today's "systemic and institutional realities" (p. 47). In today's progressively economized world where an individual's value is most often referred to in financial terms (Brown, 2015), advocating for discourse on context is more easily said than done. Compounding the challenge is how the objectives of public institutions including education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), nongovernmental and not-for-profit agencies have also been influenced by neoliberal priorities (Ismail & Kamat, 2018). In addition, as Voegtlin (2016) shares, scholars "still have a limited understanding of the exact responsibilities of leaders, of the stakeholders' expectations of a responsible leader, and of the challenges of behaving ethically and responsibly as a business leader," (p. 582). Reinforcing and building upon Voegtlin's assertion is how language embedded in popular leadership styles and theories also cause confusion. For example, while transformational leadership encourages leaders to change their practices and focus on

uniting and inspiring others, the primary objective remains to enhance performance (Lyubovnikova, Legood, Turner, & Mamakouka, 2017) and effectiveness (Sturm, Vera & Crossan, 2017).

> Transformational leadership attracts such attention because of its relevance and importance to organizational productivity. Robust evidence has shown that followers of transformational leaders are more productive, regardless of whether performance is measured at the individual, team, unit, or firm level. (Ng, 2017 p. 385)

Another way in which today's context is influencing and challenging the concept of what it means to be responsible manifests in what some call corporate social irresponsibility (Stachowicz-Stanusch et al., 2017). Some corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives garner criticism (Boersma, 2019; Scherer, 2018) for, as an example, making small to moderate investments in sustainability projects while seeking significant enhancement to their public relations images (Banerjee, 2008; Aras & Crowther, 2016). Activists have called organizations and leaders hypocritical for donating to efforts related to specific issues such as equality in the workplace and fair working conditions while at the same time outsourcing production to developing countries known for employing those very practices (Fernando, 2011; Horrigan, 2010). Inherent in these and other such examples is what I recognize as the economization of responsibility. Others have referred to "corporate hypocrisy" (Wagner, Lutz & Weitz, 2009) to describe how credit for being responsible can be bought. Choosing to learn about responsibility and today's context then is itself a significant undertaking which some leaders may be unable or unwilling to pursue.

### *Privileging Others*

A responsible leader must not only strive to consider the interests of others (Claar et al., 2016), but privilege them in decisions made. Articulated in different ways, this notion appears as a common denominator in the literature around what responsible leaders should do (Dyllick, 2015; Greenleaf & Spears, 2002). For example, Voegtlin (2016) notes that a responsible leader must integrate the needs of a broad array of stakeholders into business-related decision-making. Others make clear that privileging stakeholders involves making decisions that privilege those who have no direct, economic connection with an organization (Stone-Johnson, 2014). For example, elevating self- and organizational-interests alongside those of a community or not-for-profit organization is a first step which requires leaders and organizations to see themselves as situated within society and as being responsible to more than just economic metrics (Maak & Pless, 2006b). Elevating interests must however lead to actually privileging others in decisions.

At its core, privileging means to move from talking about responsibility to action (Pless & Maak, 2011; Voegtlin, 2017b). As highlighted by Kempster and Carroll (2016), without change in behaviour, the discussion remains at the level of an academic debate or vision statements posted on walls. Recognizing that one has responsibility to work toward solutions to broader societal, ecological, and humanitarian challenges must be accompanied by examples of making decisions that challenge conventional expectations.

### *Focusing on the Long Term*

Review of the literature elucidates how current-day priorities include maximizing short-term gain and securing immediate results (Brown, 2015). As such, priorities associated with responsible leadership such as “engaging in long-term thinking and in perspective taking” (p. Voegtlin, 2016, p. 581) are silenced. In addition, focus on short term imperatives also risk how

leaders approach being in relationship with others—specifically, how they hold themselves "in relation with, and therefore morally accountable to, others" (Cunliffe & Erikson, 2011, p. 1425). Taking time to build relationships in a manner that is responsible then emerges as counter to conventional norms and values that focus on doing what is effective and efficient, timely and productive. The aphorism that "time is money," attributed to Benjamin Franklin (1748), speaks clearly to today's context which prioritizes speed of action as opposed to depth of engagement.

***Respecting the Complexity***

Responsible leadership is consistently referenced in the literature as being challenging and complex. As such I offer that responsibility can be conceptualized as a "wicked" human problem (Churchman, 1967). I draw on Kolko (2012) who has reprised the phrase coined decades ago and asserts that wicked problems today are those which are difficult if not impossible to solve. What makes things difficult includes there being incomplete or contradictory knowledge about the matter, the sheer number of people and opinions involved, the economic burden associated with the problem, and the interconnected nature of the problem.

Drawing on Kolko's (2012) definition, I highlight how the debate around what responsibility means grows ever more complicated. For example, in some cases words such as ethics, accountability, morality and responsibility are conflated and used interchangeably. At other times, they are approached and discussed as distinct concepts (Busser, 2019; Kuye & Mafunisa, 2003). In addition, recent work (Martins & Lazzarin, 2020; Stachowicz-Stanush, et al., 2017) speaks to how more responsible leadership requires focus on better defining irresponsible leadership (often described as self-serving, motivated by greed, and driven by narcissism). In the era of COVID-19, irresponsible decisions are now being called out for creating widespread harm, leading to death (Shammas et al., 2020, July 7), and the worst human

health crisis since the Spanish Flu outbreak of 1918 (Walsh, 2020, March 25). Thus, while there is agreement that the lack of responsible decision-making continues to cause economic, social, and political disasters (Alexander, 2015; McIntosh, 2017); the lack of shared understanding and the growing number of opinions confound an already complex challenge.

As Kolko (2012) notes, "wicked" problems are also ones which are highly interconnected. In the case of responsibility, there are a multiplicity of ways in which the concept is taken-up and understood across disciplines and fields. Given the scope of the present study, I highlight only how responsibility can be seen objectively (legally, organizationally, and societally) and subjectively (or individually) (Cooper, 2006). Responsibility is also associated with psychology and genetics (Tabb, Lebowitz & Applebaum, 2019) and is explored by others as being collective and shared (B. Carroll, 2016). Complexity also arises from the way in which making responsible decisions is entangled with practices that leaders avoid or fear engaging in. For example, responsibility is tied to having difficult conversations (Stone et al., 2010), driving change (Ford et al., 2008), and addressing conflict (Muntean, 2018). Concerns swirl regarding whether responsible leadership is even possible (Ketola, 2012) in a world described as being "unforgiving" (Badaracco, 2013) and, metaphorically, as "dark times" (Bridle, 2018; Giroux, 2015; Parsons, 2018; Sierz, 2017). Scholars aptly note that putting responsible leadership into practice "may be easier to imagine than to achieve" (Gardiner, 2017, p. 33) as cynicism and fear (George, 2016; Pendleton & Furnham, 2016) persist about leaders and leadership.

Speaking directly to the complexity individuals encounter leading responsibly in today's world, Gardiner (2020) warns how leaders can confuse individual responsibility with alignment or obedience to the law or to others. In her analysis of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's leadership in connection with the SNC-Lavalin scandal, Gardiner turns to Hannah Arendt's work

on judgement, and on collective and individual responsibility. Gardiner reinforces the perspective that who a leader is, and how leaders see themselves in the world influences not only how they judge what is responsible in others, but also what they perceive as responsible action for themselves.

To conclude, these tenets—activating agency; understanding your context, privileging others, focusing on the long-term, and respecting the complexity—help ground the definition of a responsible leader which I use in this study: Responsible leaders are individuals in formal or informal positions (Dugan, 2017) who choose to see themselves as part of, or within, society (Maak & Pless, 2006). As such, they recognize the importance of, and endeavour to move beyond, attending to short-term, self- and organizational interests in decision-making (Voegtlin, 2016) in order to attend to and address societal, ecological, and humanitarian challenges (Kempster & Carroll, 2016). A responsible leader elevates the interests of stakeholders in society to a position alongside economic metrics, despite the challenges (Brown, 2015) of so doing.

**Responsible Leadership**

Responsible leadership emerged in the late 20th century and early 2000s as one of dozens of theories and frameworks associated with leadership and leadership styles. With scandals tied to leadership decisions causing harm to the economy, the environment, and society, these theories focused on changing the direction of leadership practice. In 2011, Sachs expressed that, “a society of markets, laws, and elections is not enough if the rich and powerful fail to behave with respect, honesty, and compassion toward the rest of society and toward the world” (p. 3). Given the mounting concerns about responsible leadership today, the statement remains as relevant as when it was first shared.

### *Origin and Early Development*

Responsible leadership as a theory was first proposed by Thomas Maak and Nicola Pless (2005) at a time when, they assert, the world was becoming increasingly interconnected. In so doing they highlighted the need for a relational approach in the context of leading responsibly. What drove the authors was the lack of conceptual work on responsibility in leadership and on "what responsible leadership in a stakeholder context and in regard to sustainable futures required" (Maak, 2016, p.xvi). Maak notes that he and Pless hoped to trigger discussion about the responsibility of leaders to create "a better world" (p.xvi). In their initial efforts to define, delineate, and differentiate responsible leadership and responsible leaders, Maak and Pless (2006a) integrated key concepts from other theories of leadership such as ethical leadership (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Ciulla, 2003), servant leadership (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002), and authentic and transformational leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). A responsible leader, they wrote, is a servant (in service to others), steward (considering social, environmental, and cultural realities, and possible conflicts), coach (facilitating and supporting), architect (building an inclusive culture of integrity), storyteller (creating shared systems of meaning), and change agent.

Responsible leadership has a strong connection with corporate social responsibility and stakeholder theory. The key point that differentiates corporate social responsibility from responsible leadership is how the former is inextricably linked to organizational strategy and operations (Rasche, Morsing, & Moon, 2017), and is tied to boosting brand perception and competitive advantage (Amoako & Dartey-Baah, 2020). While theories of corporate social responsibility use language such as 'the common good' and 'the public interest,' they continue to prioritize the making of more effective leaders who can achieve organizational goals and

objectives (Tang, 2019). The opening sentence from a recent article in a business journal offers an illustration: “In today's socially conscious environment, employees and customers place a premium on working for and spending their money with businesses that prioritize corporate social responsibility” (Schooley, 2020, para. 1). Accepting that theories of corporate responsibility have contributed to the leadership field and to change, they nevertheless remain focussed on economic metrics and are critiqued for seemingly adding just another “fiery adjective” to the word leadership, “as if that makes them theoretically distinct” notes Brigid Carroll (2016, p. 42).

### *Differentiation in the Field*

Despite some concern that responsible leadership may follow a trajectory similar to that of other leadership theories and focus on economic metrics, scholars developing a theoretical framework for responsible leadership began early on to identify, theorize, and research the idea of responsibility as an explicit, unique concept in the field of leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006b). What sets responsible leadership apart, says Brigid Carroll (2016), is that it highlights responsibility itself and brings it to the foreground. Thus, responsible leadership has helped to fill gaps left silent in other styles and theories of leadership (Antonakis & Day, 2017) which, by focussing on making leaders more effective, characterize responsibility as accountability for performance, delivery of results, adherence to the law, and reaching goals (Burns, 1978; Yukl, Gordon, & Taber, 2002). Scholars focussed on responsible leadership, however, consider accountability as that which looks “toward the specific concerns of others, an obligation to act on standards and to be accountable for the consequences of one’s actions” (Waldman & Galvin, 2008, p. 328). Responsible leadership calls for leaders and organizations not just to be

accountable to organizational objectives but to accept that their decisions have consequence for others.

Those focussed on developing responsible leadership question the normative idea that by, virtue of their titles, leaders are somehow "response-able." The underlying assumption in many leadership theories and styles of leadership has for the most part been that leaders are not only accountable for certain objectives (professionally) but that they have the discretion (ability to choose) and volition (desire) to make responsible decisions (Cameron & Caza, 2005; Felt, 2016). These perspectives, however, do not take into consideration significant structural and contextual factors which have tremendous impact and influence on a leader's agency (Salancik & Meindl, 1984). Such factors comprise another dimension by which responsible leadership can be differentiated; they explicitly highlight how context affects a leader's ability to make choices that are in the interest of others (Walsh, Weber, & Margolis, 2003), not just themselves, and in support of objectives beyond those of their organization.

A final point that differentiates responsible leadership from other leadership theories relates to the emphasis responsible leadership places on leaders to recognize themselves as situated within society and as being part of society. Thus, leaders attempting to make responsible decisions recognize that their decisions have broader implications. While other theories and approaches are also adopting this mindset, responsible leadership has since its inception focussed on all affected stakeholders—not just followers, shareholders, or those with an economic relationship with the leader or the organization. Responsible leadership recognizes success as establishing consensual solutions and addressing challenges, as involving more than performance alone (Voegtlin et al., 2012).

**Responsible Leadership in the World of Business**

While the concept of responsibility in leadership is expanding across disciplines and fields, a large proportion of the literature, research, and scholarship on the topic continues to stem from and align with the world of business. Maak (2007) calls on responsible leaders to "build and cultivate sustainable relationships with stakeholders . . . to achieve mutually shared objectives based on a vision of business as a force of good from many, and not just a few" (p. 331). Pless (2007) specifically notes that responsible leaders must reconcile "the idea of corporate responsibility" with "being an active citizen and promoting active citizenship inside and outside the organization" (p. 450). Pless, Maak, and de Jongh (2011) introduced the idea of responsible leaders as those who are willing to question the moral and social order, consider the needs of stakeholders, focus on shared objectives, and look toward the ethical and values dimensions of decision-making. Their language speaks directly to the for-profit sector and to the need for leaders in business to focus on more than just economics. Leaders, they suggest, must focus on becoming involved and working toward broader issues that affect society as a whole:

> A multilevel response to gaps in existing leadership frameworks and theories, to high-profile scandals on individual, organizational and systemic levels; and to new emerging social, ethical and environment challenges in an increasingly connected world, responsible leaders are framed as those who acknowledge their shared, significant responsibility in tackling the challenges of the day. (Pless, 2011, p. 4)

Business schools have been quick to take up the concept of responsible leadership. The University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business, for example, highlights their focus on "inspiring and educating responsible leaders." The Global Alliance in Management

Education[1] (CEMS, 2020) has for years focussed on responsible global leadership as a key tenet of its program. CEMS now has 33 member schools, 70 corporate partners (multinational companies), seven social partners (NGOs), and a presence on every continent. In Switzerland, the Business School Lausanne has developed CARL (Competency Assessment for Responsible Leadership) which identifies 45 distinctive competencies related to responsible leadership and offers interested parties the opportunity to be measured and assessed. UBC, CEMS, and Lausanne demonstrate that a wide range of scholars, educators, and practitioners are focussing on the concept of responsible leadership, a phenomenon that helps to dispel concerns that responsible leadership may amount to just another fad or flavour of the day. Indeed, as Voegtlin suggests, (2017b) being responsible is becoming a "necessary and desirable culture change" (para.7) for leaders and organizations to embrace.

Several well-known business-oriented think tanks and institutions are also focussing on responsible leadership as an emerging theoretical framework. The Globally Responsible Leader Initiative (GRLI), for example, headquartered in Brussels, is a non-profit community of businesses, business schools, and educational institutions that is calling on leaders to integrate into their practice responsibility to oneself, others (stakeholders), and to society. GRLI's stated aim is to create deep and systemic change in terms of how human beings live, make a living, learn, and lead**.** The Centre for Responsible Leadership is another non-profit institution, this one based in New York, which seeks to foster the development of responsible leaders who will focus on the future, make decisions based on conviction as opposed to convenience, and be constructive rather than destructive. As a non-profit concerned with building awareness of the

[1] The Global Alliance in Management Education was formerly known as the Community of European Management Schools and International Companies, hence the acronym CEMS

tenets of responsible leadership, they focus on advocacy, mentoring, and recognition programs to support the rebuilding of trust between the public and private institutions. While I do not evaluate these organizations in this work, their emergence and continued growth illustrates the interest which exists in enhancing responsible leadership in the for-profit world.

Interest in responsible leadership is by no means limited to the world of business or the for-profit world. The concept and the framework are being explored and advanced in health care (McCullough, 2012), schools of medicine as evidence on the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry's website (2020), and by those studying spirituality and religion (Siddiqi, Chick & Dibben, 2017). While focus on incorporating the concept of responsibility into research predates COVID-19 (Marques, Reis & Gomes, 2018), the pandemic has made the notion of responsible leadership even more urgent (Ienca & Vayena, 2020), particularly in relation to future medical research (Tsui, 2020).

### *Emerging Needs and Challenges*

Responsible leadership did not emerge from a vacuum, and it does not evolve in one either. Scholars working in the field have had to respond to emerging needs and expectations, and responsible leadership, as a result, has evolved quickly over the last 15-20 years. Figure 2 provides a snapshot of key developments. A few points of interest include how the proliferation of interest has intensified since the turn of the century, and how it appears to rise following periods of intense economic, political, and social disarray. One such period occurred at the turn of the century when the so-called dot.com bubble burst. Another occurred in the period following the 2008 financial crisis in which greed led to decision-making that plunged the world into recession (Gandz et al., 2010).

**Figure 2** Evolution of Responsibility in Leadership


In 2011, a special edition of the *Journal of Business Ethics* was dedicated to responsible leadership. It distilled the outcomes of the first international conference on responsible readership held a year earlier. The contributing authors acknowledged the numerous challenges involved in bringing about change "in the face of dominant business-as-usual market, policy and paradigmatic forces," (Pless, Maak & de Jongh, 2011, Foreword, p.1). They also, however, proceeded to outline opportunities to continue exploring possibilities and questions on topics such as how, at an individual level, leaders can come to question the contemporary moral and social order, and how to move beyond the skills and attributes dimensions towards investing in the ethical and values dimensions of leadership.

On a business level, they highlighted the need to operationalize responsible leadership; reframe the rules (the social contract with stakeholders) that guide business practices; and

critically engage with approaches and paradigms of business education. Finally, on a societal level, they discussed the need to facilitate global citizenship and collaboration—to move "from the ‘me’ to the ‘we’ to the ‘us’" (Pless, Maak & de Jongh, 2011). In the years following that special edition, a great deal of scholarship, research, and work by practitioners ensued as evidenced in *Figure 2.*

Focus on responsible leadership continues to grow but now, arguably, with a new imperative. In the work of academics and in respected media outlets, concerns related to responsible leadership appear in the context of the #MeToo (Regulska, 2018) and #BlackLivesMatter (Isaar, 2020) movements, the lack of responsible decision-making around climate change (McCarthy, 2019), and the return to what is widely referred to as strong arm leadership and populism (Barrett, 2017; Bremmer, 2018). Since January 2020, discussion in the public sphere about responsibility and leadership (Rasheed, 2020) has focussed on decision-making associated with the COVID-19 outbreak. Of interest with these most recent areas of focus is the shift away from discussion of bad business decisions that have cost jobs and threatened the economy, and away from general discussions about the social good. Today the discussion focusses on irresponsible decision-making that is linked to a culture in which sexual assault and harassment has become normalized, marginalized people continue to experience discrimination, and environmental catastrophes, loss of freedom, and the direct loss of human life occur regularly.

**Responsible Leadership in Education**

With the establishment of such major initiatives such as the GRLI, and organizations such as Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) established in 2007 to nurture **“**responsible leaders of the future” (PRME, 2020), the link between education and

responsible leadership in business has been solidified. That said, responsible leadership as an area of focus in education extends much further and deeper.

***Research and Scholarship***

As scholar, Robert Starratt (2004) contributes broadly to the fields of educational leadership, ethical leadership, and responsible leadership, and connects responsibility in educational leadership to citizenship. He has encouraged leaders in education to develop "a moral vision of what is required of them and of the whole community" (p.124) and to be proactive in addressing ethical issues faced in education. He speaks to a growing need for multidimensional leaders who can take responsibility for teaching students how to participate as active citizens. Starratt's (2004) five domains of responsibility are central to responsible leadership in education: responsibility as a human being, as a citizen and public servant, as an educator, as an educational administrator, and as an educational leader. Only by "honoring" all these responsibilities, he suggests, can leaders hope to move beyond "transactional ethics" and engage in "transformative ethics" (p.133), or the kind of change he is advocating. Starratt's five domains require leaders to connect to the needs and expectations of stakeholders, and to take responsibility for shepherding resources, structures, and processes. His ideas align with Waldman and Galvin's (2008) proposition that being responsible has both an economic and a stakeholder perspective, and that responsible leaders should be held accountable to both. Starratt (2004) also suggests that just as students should be educated in civic responsibility, so should leaders be educated to create relationships among diverse subgroups. His position is manifest in responsible leadership and evidenced, for example, in the work of scholars such as Kempster and Carroll (2016) who speak to the need for responsible leaders to have a "global *citizen* orientation" and to engage in an increasingly "diverse, dispersed and distributed" context (p. 5).

Stone-Johnson (2014) is another educational scholar and researcher interested in responsible leadership. Using data from a large-scale multinational study of leaders who perform beyond expectations, she formulates a theory for responsible educational leadership. Stone-Johnson calls on educational leaders to "ask how leadership can move beyond a focus on individual and school level changes to collective leadership that relies on the strength of relationships between schools and the communities in which they reside to foster and sustain change" (p. 645). Here again is a call for leaders (educational leaders in this case) to situate themselves within society and engage with the needs and expectations of a broader group of stakeholders; to refocus and engage in research and collaborative initiatives that support the needs of their community, not solely their institutions or their own aspirations to be published.

Smit and Mabusela (2019) have also focussed on responsibility in educational leadership. They highlight the necessity of moving beyond distributed and transformational leadership practices in order to support school leaders trying to make change in diverse communities that face complex challenges. Smit and Mabusela suggest that engaging deeply with leaders and using narrative inquiry to focus on their needs and expectations, can help build relationships and ultimately inform not just scholarship but practice.

### *Leadership Education*

The academy has a key role to play in the development of socially responsible leaders and socially responsible practices and environments in education (Cauthen, 2016). Raatz and Euler (2017), however, express concerns about the ability of universities to teach graduate and executive-level students the competencies they need to deal with complex problems in modern society. The key competencies in question include the very process through which values and attitudes related to responsibility and ethical issues are developed. Raatz & Euler (2017) report

the results of a study focussed on how pedagogical interventions in management education can be designed to promote learners' attitudes to responsible leadership. One of the key findings is the problematic that neither consensual definitions of responsible leadership nor substantial theories are available to support the design of promising interventions.

Related to the concept of educational interventions, Ladkin (2018) addresses both the value and the challenge of incorporating the concept of responsibility into the education of leaders. Ladkin contends that leaders can indeed develop the muscles needed to engage in ethical and responsible practice and offers five design elements which can be embedded in educational interventions to support the development of more ethically astute and responsible leaders: building bridges, expanding perception, developing negative capability, encouraging inquiry and reflexivity, and employing immersive assessment activities. Ladkin acknowledges the role of education and educators to support leaders develop.

Martins and Lazzarin (2020) target academics, educators, and researchers in the field of leadership in their focus on "the call for business schools to do more in developing responsible leadership curriculum" (p. 4). They discuss needs related to responsible leadership as well as to the education of leaders across disciplines, describe irresponsible leadership from a cross-disciplinary perspective, and highlight how to develop reflective and reflexive practice. As well, they encourage innovation and creativity in teaching irresponsible leadership as a threshold concept of responsible leadership.

**Responsible Leadership: Moving Forward**

Kempster and Carroll (2016) argue that responsibility must be explored in its fullest form. Noting that scholarship related to responsible leadership has yet to embrace interdisciplinary thinking, they advocate moving beyond "leader-centric notions of leadership"

(p. 9) to consider responsibility in various dimensions. They identify ten dimensions which speak to what being responsible today entails and what responsible leadership could look like in the future (Appendix A). Associated with each of the ten dimensions of responsibility are gaps and challenges that raise questions which the authors note yet be researched and addressed (Appendix A). The authors do not offer any solutions for the list of dimensions and questions, but rather encourage researchers to explore and develop insights. For presentation purposes, the full list is presented in Appendix A and will be considered in the analysis of research findings.

Miska and Mendenhall (2018) recently mapped the state of responsible leadership in order to highlight gaps and identify direction for future work in the field. They note that responsible leadership is differentiated by its focus on "a multitude of stakeholders inside and outside the organization" (p. 119). They describe how responsible leadership has evolved from its normative roots, focussed solely at the micro-level (the level of the individual), to focus on multiple levels of analysis including organizational (meso) and societal (macro) levels. They also acknowledge that progress has been made towards understanding responsible leadership as a relational process which takes place through interaction between people, groups, organizations, and external stakeholders. Their review reinforces both key developments and progress in the field of responsible leadership, as well as ongoing and new challenges that educators, practitioners, researchers, and scholars must face in order to develop this framework.

Miska and Mendenhall (2018) also discuss the need for increased methodological diversity in the leadership field that will permit the capturing of particularities of each level of analysis—micro, macro, meso, and cross-level research. Measurement is another key area for development across different levels of analysis as well as exploration of global dimensions—understanding responsible leadership within the global context. Miska and Mendenhall (2018)

further state that more work is needed to anchor responsible leadership more solidly within leadership studies overall ; they advocate for scholars to continue to expand their focus rather than to seek convergence. Focussing on responsible leadership is intended to "stimulate an ongoing rethinking of the leadership concept" (p.130) and to have an impact on general leadership as well.

Work on responsible leadership as a theoretical framework continues. As scholarship, research, and practice evolve, new questions replace old ones even as many long-term challenges remain. Whether looking at the more recent focus on irresponsible leadership or the decades old discussion around the points of connection and differentiation between ethical, moral, relational, and responsible leadership, the need for change in terms of what and who leaders privilege is clear.

**Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning theory (TLT) is one of many theories developed over the last hundred years that focus on the cognitive processes by which adults make meaning.[2] These theories have stemmed from various fields including educational philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and educational anthropology, and from fields such as organizational behaviour, philosophy, psychology, cybernetics, and design (Millwood, 2013). They represent "different angles, different epistemology platforms and very different content" (Illeris, 2018, p. 1). The dynamic nature of the field reflects a growing demand for adult education, the pressures of globalization, and the demands of today's increasingly complex and technological world of work

[2] All adult learning theories recognize that adults are continually learning and transforming "the essences of everyday living and of conscious experience… into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and beliefs" (Jarvis. 1992, p. 11). Three foundational theories dominate the field today: andragogy (Knowles, 1968), self-directed learning (Tough, 1971) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978). Andragogy focuses on the characteristics of adult learning such as how experience becomes a base or resource for learning. Self-directed learning focuses on how adult learners take control of their own learning and development. Transformative learning focuses on the cognitive process of how adults make meaning.

(Boud & Garrick, 2012; Seaman, Brown & Quay, 2017). Given that my focus in the current study is on how leaders can come to make changes in their decision-making—how they might make a transformational change in their thinking—TLT would seem to offer a particularly appropriate lens through which to approach this study.

Jack Mezirow (1923-2014) is considered the architect of transformative learning theory (TLT). For transformative learning to take place, Mezirow noted the importance of acknowledging "how we are caught in our own history and are reliving it" (1978, p. 101). Referencing the influence of scholars who preceded him, Mezirow identified three central concepts in his work—critical reflection, dialogue, and experience (Mezirow, 1991). He coined the term "disorienting dilemmas" for events, experiences, or "rapidly changing behavioral norms" (p. 101) that create the need for adults to change or transform. Disorienting dilemmas may include challenges such as losing a job or facing a significant health issue or ethical challenge. Mezirow's work was originally driven by his interest in how education could facilitate transformation which can but does not necessarily take place upon experiencing a disorienting dilemma.

For Mezirow (1978), transformation requires a process which he developed into a theory and continued to adapt throughout his lifetime (Merriam, 2018). As an illustration of how context has influence, Hoggan (2016) highlights how Mezirow's interest in transformation emerged from his work during the 1970s—a decade which many recognize as involving significant social change. Ferguson et al. (2010) describe the 1970s as a time defined by crisis—from capitalism (p. 25) to globalization (p. 143), and from the Vietnam War (p. 159) to the rebirth of human rights (p. 237). Associated with some of these major shifts, many women participated in return-to-work educational programs in US colleges, a movement which is said to

have sparked Mezirow's interest in their experiences (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978) and the concept of transformation. Over time, Mezirow developed what he called a theory of perspective transformation. He defined perspective transformation as a structural change in the way people see themselves and how they engage in the world. The objective for encouraging change is to have individuals become more inclusive, learn from experience and be more discriminating of conventional norms and values. Almost until the time of his death, Mezirow engaged in developing his work into what Merriam (2018) notes is likely the most researched and studied area in adult learning theory. Mezirow's study of how adults fundamentally change how they think and what they privilege is certainly relevant to scholarship concerning how leaders can come to embrace tenets of responsible leadership in their practice.

Mezirow's evolving work (1978, 1997, 2000, 2003) demonstrated that while adult learners construct meaning in order to make sense of the world around them, they often do so uncritically. They may, for example, simply assimilate and even privilege the values, perceptions, and priorities of others. They do not always act independently, or even follow their own feelings or purpose. Mezirow's aspiration for adult learners was that they should gain greater control over their lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking, decision makers (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7)—an aspiration that also aligns with and informs the present study. For example, the key tenets of responsible leadership include leaders needing to make a choice despite the realities of a context that privileges growth and profit. Mezirow's focus on adult learners thinking more independently, being less influenced by others and social context, and opening themselves to what he calls frames of reference (habits of mind and points of view) align with the key notions of responsibility underpinning the present study.

Mezirow (2000) proposed that adult learners, in order to achieve transformational outcomes, engage in a rigorous process that begins with identifying a disorienting dilemma. He suggests that individuals examine the feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame associated with that dilemma, critically assess their assumptions about it, and then, having recognized their own discomfort and discontent, share and discuss it with others. Communication is key. The next steps in the process include exploring options (perhaps new roles, relationships, or actions) and then actually planning specific steps which could include acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans. Mezirow advocated piloting or trying out the options and new skills in order to build competence and self-confidence. Fundamentally, then, transformation is a change in actions and behaviour that reflects one's new perspective (p. 22). Recognizing concerns about the normative and prescriptive nature of Mezirow's process, I focus in my work on two major elements of Mezirow's (2006) concept of transformative learning: "critical reflection or critical self-reflection on assumptions" and "participating fully and freely in dialectical discourse to validate a best reflective judgement" (p.117). With these elements in play, the possibility of alternative solutions and approaches emerges.

***Theoretical Value to My Research***

Related to my research on the possibility of experienced leaders in their fields choosing alternative priorities in their decision-making, TLT is a valuable linchpin. TLT reinforces the notion that adults can learn not only from their own experience, but also from the experience of others (Day, et al., 2009) thus aligning with my focus on understanding how leaders earn through experience. This perspective is embraced in transformative learning given that "one of the primary goals of transformative learning in is to promote mutual understanding (Mezirow, 1991, p. 77). Finally, one of my hopes for the present study is to encourage leaders to effect change by

being more responsible in their decision-making. Therefore, I seek transformative change—change that is critical in nature and that shifts the focus of leaders away from self- and organizational interests alone and toward the interests of all stakeholders, including those without economic interests.

Leaders make decisions in an environment in which growth, individualism, and profit are privileged (Brown, 2015). Making responsible decisions then— considering interests beyond self and the organization—is challenging and can have negative consequences. That said, I hold firm to the belief and conviction that leaders to some extent still have agency. My research then aligns with Mezirow's (1991) assertion that it is by placing ourselves in uncomfortable situations that we are fully able to develop our understanding of the world and of ourselves, and that the possibility for transformative learning emerges when a change occurs to our frame of reference as a result of a disorienting event or experience (Mezirow, 1997).

Drawing on Mezirow's (1997, 1998, 2003, 2006) evolving work, the key elements of TLT that are most pertinent to the present study are these:

- The types of events or experiences that can lead to transformative learning are significant, challenging, and discomfiting; they are experiences that do not fit into a person's existing beliefs about the world (Mezirow, 1991).
- Transformative learning occurs when there is a change in one's frame of reference (habits of mind and points of view) as a result of a disorienting event, experience, or dilemma (Mezirow, 1997).
- Adult learners go through a process in order to fundamentally reconsider beliefs and values (Mezirow, 1978).

- For learning to be considered transformative, a change must translate into action and involve a change in behaviour (Mezirow, 2003).
- Transformative learning results in adults becoming more empowering, inclusive, self-reflective, open and integrative of change, willing and able to promote autonomous and responsible lifelong thinking patterns, and engage in the world with a sense of community (Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Taylor, 2011).

These key elements provide a foundation for analyzing the stories my research participants told.

### *Critiques of TLT*

A major critique of TLT is akin to one that is levelled at responsible leadership—that there is a lack of clarity around many of the concepts, terms, and words associated with the theory (Hoggan, 2016; Kitchenham, 2008). Terms such as transformation, perspective transformation, and transformational learning serve to both enrich and complicate discussion. Dirkx (1998) notes that "what transformative learning means and how it is best fostered within formal learning settings varies considerably, depending on one's theoretical perspective" (p. 1). Beyond the field of education, the concept of transformative learning has attracted attention from scholars in philosophy, psychology and sociology (Wallgren, 2006). Having a transformative mindset is recognized as valuable in business and practice (Taylor & Cranton, 2012); transformative research is advocated for in the sciences (Trevors et al., 2012) and is endorsed by the National Sciences Foundation. The various concepts, phrases, terms, and words that have been taken up and adapted in these various fields (Brookfield, 2004) has resulted in what Cranton and Taylor (2013) describe as a construct that is "rarely defined or critically examined" (p. 35). Without universally recognized definitions across various disciplines and among various scholars, the term transformative risks becoming meaningless (Newman, 2012).

A second common critique of Mezirow's original work is that TLT is such a highly rational approach to transformation that it decontextualizes learning and fails to deal adequately with questions of culture, ideology, and power. Brookfield and Holst (2014) note that "the self cannot stand outside the social, cultural and political streams within which it swims," (p. 7), a perspective also reflected in discussions of responsible leadership. Taylor and Cranton (2012) add that "not only is the interpretation of an experience mediated by context, but also the personal and historical context is significant to the evolution and outcome of a transformative experience" (p. 36).

Finally, in an article published in *Lifelong Learning: Concepts and Contexts* (Sutherland & Crowther, 2006), Mezirow himself acknowledged and discussed concerns raised by psychologists about the effect of learners' psychological predispositions on learning (Cranton, 1994), the impact of childhood trauma on adult development (Gould, 1978), and the role of the unconscious in learning (Elias, 1997). Taylor and Cranton (2012) highlight the need to enhance theoretical focus on topics such as understanding difference in terms of individuals' desire to change. As well, they encourage theorists to "turn a critical eye" (p. 43) to the assumption that transformative learning is inherently positive; they acknowledge that it can also be negative.

### *Possibilities for the Future of TLT*

Transformative learning as a theory is "complex and multifaceted" (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 104). It is fundamentally intended to help describe how people develop and use critical self-reflection to consider their beliefs and experiences, and how they can over time change the way they see the world (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger, 2015). Nevertheless, some scholars are advocating for a fundamental reconceptualization of transformative learning. Taylor and Cranton (2012) identify "proactive issues" in order to "rejuvenate focus," strengthen, and

consider future direction for TLT (p. 43). They suggest, for example, that fostering empathy in education could enhance transformative learning (p. 43). They also recommend that "innovative and interesting methodologies that could be applied to research," including "narrative inquiry, action research and participatory research" (p. 44) be explored.

In terms of reconceptualizing TLT, Hoggan (2016) has been working toward reframing transformative learning as a metatheory, to serve as an umbrella of sorts. Ritzer (1991) notes that a metatheory is best understood as a broad perspective overarching two or more theories; Aldridge, Kuby, & Strevy (1992) describe a metatheory as "several theories of development or learning . . . classified together based on their commonalities regarding human nature" (p. 683). Hoggan (2016) notes that, as a metatheory, Mezirow's theory could be renamed perspective transformation and be one of the theories under the broader umbrella term of TLT. Thus, Hoggan (2016) proposes that transformative learning as a metatheory would be defined as "a process that results in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes and interacts in the world" (p. 71).

**Conclusion**

While understanding and working with the evolving framework of responsible leadership is not without challenges, there is broadening support for recognizing responsibility as being a critical concept in leadership today and for working toward developing a theoretical framework that can foster and support a change in practice. As with any approach associated with leadership, definitions will continue to be debated, breadth and scope to be contested, and critique offered to support improvements and address issues. Related to my work focussing at the micro or individual level, responsible leadership provides a valuable way of thinking about the responsibility of leaders and how they situate themselves professionally in relation to the world.

Unpacking responsible leadership as a framework highlights the degree of complexity involved, the barriers and the risks associated with individuals challenging the status quo, and the hope of supporting leaders to make responsible choices. The value of transformative learning theory in my work is that it grounds the value of sharing stories in the hope of creating change. TLT speaks to the possibility of leaders transforming their decision-making as a result of learning from the experience of others and by critically reflecting on their own experience. TLT also aligns with the use of narrative inquiry to capture personal and human dimensions of experience over time and take account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

## Chapter Three: Why Responsibility Matters to Me

This dissertation is deeply personal. I have been in roles akin to those of my research participants and found myself at times struggling with the concept of being responsible in my decision-making, trying to determine who and what to prioritize, and how to engage responsibly in different situations. I have juggled options, and faced tensions and dilemmas, but have been ever mindful that my decisions could have both positive and negative impact and influence on others.

For more than 30 years I have tried to be professionally responsible. Through this process of discovery, however, I have also at times been complicit—at times, not speaking up or compromising when I should have held my ground; at times, getting engaged or trying to solve problems when I should have stepped back. I have been confused, frustrated, and at times wondering why I didn't, and why I did? Am I the only one who stays up at night thinking about these things? Was that the right thing to do? Was there a better way? I now embrace the opportunity to study and explore the experiences of other leaders. Since engaging in this work, I have taken time to reflect and have come to recognize how being responsible and having responsibility is not just a concept for study—not just a topic of academic interest. For me, it is a subject and topic which has confounded and compelled. It has been a catalyst and a challenge that has led me to this work.

To develop self-understanding, I engaged in experimental writing as part of a graduate level course on Narrative Inquiry. My hope was to articulate and give voice to my evolving understanding of responsibility and of being responsible through various phases of my life. I wanted to do so in a manner that was "meaningful and authentic" (Rankin, 2018, p. 58), but also in a way that felt safe. As a result, I wrote a series of verses (words arranged in a rhythmic

pattern) “looking inward and outward, backward and forward” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994, p. 417). In offering this reflection on my childhood experience with responsibility, I acknowledge Pagano’s (1991) warning that “we all have a tendency to fictionalize ourselves when we write about ourselves” (p. 195), and to be mindful that “there is more than one way to tell a story and more than one story” (p. 197).

**Responsible Beginnings**

Abandoned in hospital right after birth,

The future buried, yet to be unearthed.

Lucky I was told over and again,

Paperwork completed, no more ’visitations’ ending in vain.

The reminders they started, don’t sit idle my dear,

Be mindful of duty and obligation, and the less you will have to fear.

Be careful though, nothing comes for free,

Returned to foster care any day you could be.

Be responsible and perform if you wish to stay here,

Bring honour to the family and exhibit good cheer.

Do whatever it takes to make us proud,

Or back you will go, to where you were found.

(Blanchard, 2019a)

As a young adult, the ever-present threat of being “returned” evolved for me into a shared though unspoken understanding that I would be able to remain if I delivered upon expectations. Although it is still unsettling and challenging for me to “bring my past forward” (Rankin, 2018, p. 56), it is through the sharing and the telling and the retelling of my story that I start to make

meaning around how striving to be responsible became central to my sense of self. In the world outside the house, being responsible garnered recognition and became a source of pride for me. I even liked the adjectives in report cards and year books—"dependable, driven to succeed, trustworthy and reliable." Looking back on job performance reviews, I can see a pattern emerge. Early in my career I heard, "Thanks for filling in wherever you are needed," and, "We always know you will find and fill-in the grey spaces," and, "You always figure out what needs to be done and do it." In many conflict situations, I recall friends, teachers, colleagues, and even leaders consistently asking me to step in and help bridge divides. "You are good at that," I often heard them say.

By engaging and reengaging, and writing and rewriting my story, I can picture myself walking into a tattoo parlour and having "Trying to be responsible" etched on me in permanent ink. I think about how being responsible is akin to the feelings of discomfort and pain that accompany the experience of having an image chiselled onto one's body. I suspect that, like having ink imprinted on one's own skin, the hope of being responsible means being able, at some point in the future, to look upon the journey and see something of beauty, something that has meaning, and something that evokes a feeling of pride or at least an effort that leads to learning. While I have never (yet) gotten a tattoo, I toy with the idea of it as a metaphor for how being responsible has become an indelible part of who I am and who I strive to be. Returning to Pagano (1991), I am mindful of "moral fictions" and recognize that my history with being responsible is complex and not one that I wish to glorify. Rather, I am drawn to and inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's guidance to ask oneself, "Am I the change that I wish to see?"

Through self-study, I have come to realize how being responsible originally began as a duty but then morphed into a purpose, a reason for being. As a woman in my mid-fifties now, I

feel more able to ask critical questions such as where do I want to belong? Who am I now and who do I want to be? What do I really privilege? What am I willing to do and what I am comfortable being responsible for? I now feel more able to make choices and share vulnerabilities, seeing them not as deficits or weakness but as the realities that accompany a life lived deeply and with passion. As Pagano (1991) writes, "Humility requires the solidness of a life behind one to secure the unknown future" (p. 197). Thankful for having a solidness behind me, I feel able to look back—to feel pride for having stepped up or stepped in to do what I believed was right—and to learn from experiences which I would approach differently with the gift of hindsight.

I am thankful that my journey has to date been one of growth and resilience, made possible in part by the people who continue to support me and those who share their stories with me. I have spoken with leaders who, like me, have felt the weight of burdens set upon them by circumstance, and who have felt self-doubt. I have found connection with others who, like me, gravitate to roles that some question and even recoil from, saying, "Why would you ever want to do that?" and, "You could have said no." I have also shared experiences with those who, in having tried to be responsible, feel like a failure. Finding ways to work through feelings of being unable to do enough, or simply for having succumbed to pressure, is challenging. This writing illustrates my struggle with one such experience.

**Feeling Failure**

It was wrong I knew,

But nothing I tried would do.

"People could be hurt," I implored,

"Those who don't even understand they are being misused."

"Let it go" I was told,

"It's out of your hands and control.

You will anger the wrong people and that will be that.

Don't cross them, not this time, don't take this fight to the mat."

I stepped back in the end,

Deciding I didn't have the 'juice' to contend.

The decision was logical and made business sense, that's true,

But it wasn't for me, responsible too.

(Blanchard, 2019b)

While I hold some stories about my childhood and professional life secret[3] (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995), I am learning how my history has in part shaped me (Schwandt, 1998). Bringing the past forward in my own writing is key to "accounting for why I know what I know" (Shields, 2005, p. 180) and in order to authentically engage in narrative inquiry which is about "people in relation studying with people in relation" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189). Thus, by exploring my own stories and viewing them in the context of others' experiences and stories, I hope not only to better make meaning for myself but to allow "for a more socially constructed understanding" (Rankin, 2018, p. 56) of the challenges associated with being responsible.

**Learning to Let Go**

It was supposed to be my 'dream' job.

They asked me to bring my all. So much to do, needed to be done.

Excited, I jumped in and started to run.

[3] Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly (1995), I define secret stories as those told in safe places to those with whom the speaker has trusted relationships.

"You have all our support," they said. "Good people are being mistreated."

Power games amongst the entitled had become the norm.

"We want it changed, help us; you are the one."

Was it greed or corruption?

"No no," I was told. "Don't misinterpret little allowances made for the greater good."

Whispers in my ear, "Some things could be overlooked."

Employee after employee with stories of harassment, in tears.

In the words of a consultant, "This is one of the worst situations in years."

Told again, "We have your back, go do whatever is needed."

I brought down the gauntlet, and to no one's surprise--

I was then the target.

The tenured and the strong fought dirty and hard.

Sadly, leadership relented.

"Maybe we were wrong," the message, it shifted.

"The time may not be right; maybe for now, just play nice."

I sat bewildered and perplexed. Had I moved too quickly? What had I missed?

"You need to stay; you promised a fix." Was leaving weakness, was staying giving in?

What is responsible in the midst of all this?"

(Blanchard, 2019c)

I did leave my 'dream' job. It took time and it was hard; it felt painful. I learned, though, that sometimes it is okay for there no longer to be a fit. Circumstances change, but changing with them is not always the right answer.

## Chapter Four: Research Methodology

Embedded in a qualitative research paradigm, the present study takes the form of a narrative exploration of the stories leaders tell about their experience of making responsible decisions. The study focusses on "understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015, p. 6)—on "understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems" (Cresswell, 2014, p. 6). As qualitative research, the present study seeks insight to real-life experiences through the lens of its participants.

Mindful of Arthur, Waring, Coe, and Hedges' (2012) contention that "you cannot do or understand research unless you are clear about fundamental philosophical issues of ontology, epistemology, and axiology," (p. 5), I openly share how deeply I care about responsibility in leadership, and my hope that this work will support leaders in making more responsible decisions. I acknowledge that my own background shapes and influences this study and that the endeavour of helping leaders choose to make more responsible decisions is a messy human problem for which there is no simple truth or solution.

As a researcher, I recognize knowledge as subjective and socially constructed, and that social, economic, political and cultural contexts are key issues (Hammersley, 2005). I believe that individual social contexts are unique, and that human beings are active participants in the researched world. Epistemologically, I am aligned with interpretivism, and have a relativist ontology. I focus on how we come to know through the interpretation of our experience, and I engage with story as "a reflecting surface where meaning can be created" (Rankin, 2018, p. 58). Given that "methodological assumptions reflect ontological and epistemological assumptions" (Arthur, et al., 2012, p. 16), my choice of narrative, my guiding questions and techniques of data

collection (in-depth interviewing), my recognition that stories are knowledge, and my approach to analysis are all intertwined and reflective of who I am and how I understand the social world.

**Engaging with Narrative**

The value of using narrative inquiry to dig deeper and go beyond just asking questions and recording answers is well recognized (Rooney, Lawlor & Rohan, 2016). Narrative as a method of learning about, explaining, and organizing experience is age-old (Bruner 1990). It has been a "mode of reasoning, shaping our perceptions of ourselves and impacting our lives, culture and society in general" (Wiles et al., 1995, p. 90) since the time humans began communicating. Narrative inquiry is grounded in, affected by, and defined by interhuman relations (Frelin, 2013), with self-reflection as part of the knowledge construction process (Clandinin, Cave & Berendonk, 2017). Clandinin (2006) explains that in order to study experience narratively, we must first understand experience as a storied phenomenon:

> People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as [the] phenomenon under study. (p. 375)

The use of a narrative approach creates opportunity for those engaging in the work to consider and question "their own stories and practices" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, p. 277) of trying to make responsible decisions. By doing so, learning can take place. After all, posit Kolb and Kolb (2005), "learning is like breathing; it involves a taking in and processing of experiences

and a putting out or expression of what is learned" (p. 208). By interrogating our own experiences, storying and re-storying (re-sharing, re-telling, and in so doing often modifying), learning and making meaning opens possibility for individual and social change (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991). What may emerge then is a future with more leaders choosing to be responsible.

### *The Value of a Narrative Approach*

Having originated in "literature, history, anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and education" (Creswell, 2014, p. 54), research in the social sciences since the 1980s and 1990s has taken "a sharp turn to narrative" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 10). Dewey's (1938) theory of experience is often cited as underpinning narrative inquiry, and scholars including Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have advocated for lived experience as an important source of knowledge and understanding.

Narrative inquiry as a way of understanding experience is key to the present study. White and Epston (1990) note that "not only do the stories that persons have about their lives determine the meaning that they ascribe to experience, but these stories also determine which aspects of lived experiences are selected out for the ascription of meaning" (p. 40). As Etherington (2013) explains, narrative knowledge "brings together layers of understanding about a person and how they have created change" (p. 5). Narrative scholars contend that people shape their daily lives through stories—stories involving themselves and others. "Narrative inquiry is a means by which we systematically gather, analyse, and represent people's stories as told by them, which challenges traditional and modernist views of truth, reality, knowledge and personhood" (Etherington, 2013, p. 3). These stories are interpreted over time and ultimately become a way that individuals interpret their experiences and make meaning from them.

Used extensively in fields and disciplines as diverse as critical accounting, education, health care, and geography, narrative offers incredible value in building understanding of leadership. Through narrative, the experience of leaders can be made visible. Through their stories, lived experience can be interpreted and learning and meaning-making can take place (Epston, White, & Murray, 1992). By making the experience of trying to be responsible visible, I hope that interpretation can take place by all who are engaged—the teller and re-teller of the stories, I as a participant researcher, and the audience and readers. "Researchers write narratives for a larger audience than their participants," wrote Clandinin & Connelly (1991, p. 276), and I, too, hope to encourage readers to "foster reflection, storying, and re-storying" (ibid) in order to foster what Clandinin & Huber (2010) referred to as the possibility of social change. I did not begin this work with a set of hypotheses but rather an "interest in a particular phenomenon that can be understood narratively" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, p. 274). That said, I make explicit here and acknowledge my "narrative purpose" (p. 278) as wanting to support more leaders, educators of leaders, scholars in the field, and other interested parties in embracing efforts to be responsible and make responsible decisions in today's context.

***Narrative is Personal***

Narrative recognizes experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding not only for the individual telling the story, but also for others including the researcher and the audience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative focusses on understanding a phenomenon through the stories participants tell. In narrative inquiry, the researcher works "within the space" which means that the researcher not only engages with participants but also works on themselves, through their own lived and told stories.

In narrative inquiry, it is impossible as a researcher to "stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 48). The way questions are asked and responded to in an interview, for example, influences how participants respond and give accounts of their experience." Thus, my role as researcher is by no means that of an impassive, objective by-stander. I am a participant researcher weaving my experiences and meaning-making throughout, and sharing my stories along with others.

As a relational research methodology, narrative inquiry requires that the researcher and the research participants develop and maintain a caring, respectful, reciprocal working relationship. The first step in so doing stems from me, the researcher, being open about who I am and how I continue to make sense of where I have been and where I envisage going (in life, as a human being). At the same time, I hold with respect participants' willingness to share with me stories about themselves. As one narrative inquirer insists, "Their stories are enough" (Rankin, 2019, personal communication), emphasizing again that the stories participants tell have value. That said, I remain mindful of Clandinin and Connelly's (1994) note that participants may share different kinds of stories. In cover stories, for example, people portray themselves as characters and often as experts. There are also sacred stories which often cannot be fully or directly told because they lie "deep in the consciousness of people" (Crites, 1971, p. 294). Secret stories are those that focus on what is done in practice and shared only with trusted others. What matters most to me is the willingness of participants to explore and engage in what at times can become a lengthy, chaotic, and often complex process of telling stories which move temporally and involve looking inward, reflecting outward, moving backward, and possibly going forward (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 417). Stories, after all, provide "a reflecting surface where meaning can be created" (Rankin, 2018, p. 58) by the reader.

### *Rigour and Trustworthiness*

Narrative inquiry is well-suited to studying the stories a limited number of individuals tell in hope of understanding how they derive meaning from their experiences. Clandinin (2013) recommends constantly reviewing, reconsidering, and attending to 12 touchstones of narrative inquiry: recognizing and fulfilling relational responsibilities; being in the midst; having a commitment to understanding lives in motion; negotiating relationships; narrative beginnings; negotiating entry to the field; moving from field to field texts; moving from field texts to interim and final research texts; attending to temporality, sociality, and place; interacting with relational response communities; explaining justifications (personal, practical, and social); and attending to multiple audiences (Clandinin, 2013, p. 212). These touchstones help to ensure that the narrative inquirer produces a text that is open to the subjective understanding of the reader but that is also closely aligned to the participants' subjective understanding of themselves. As well, the touchstones help to guide researchers in judging the trustworthiness of a study.

I attempted to be guided by Clandinin's touchstones throughout my inquiry. During some discussions, for example, I realized that the participants were having conversations with themselves. I was there, but as they told and retold their stories, they asked themselves questions and proceeded to talk through their answers. I recognized in those situations that I was truly in the midst of their experience and meaning making, and that my responsibility was to allow them to work through their thinking processes. Once they came to a conclusion for themselves or finished their train of thought, I often then engaged them with inquiries about temporality and space, and with questions about who else was involved. I was careful to recognize and adapt to participants who did not feel comfortable appearing on camera or who needed to change meeting times because of personal or professional challenges. I recognized that their lives were in

motion: Two of my research participants, for example, changed roles during the research—one changed their institution, and one retired. I was open with my own stories as an educator which helped in building relationships and developing trust for what were often in-depth, dense, complex, and personal conversations about challenging experiences.

### *Critiques and Concerns*

Reissman (2008) identifies a key challenge with narrative inquiry—that there is no "simple, clear definition" (p. 3) of how narrative is used in the human sciences. The lack of definition reinforces the need for researchers to be clear about their own use of narrative and mindful of the challenges. Other critics contend that narrative research "can reify the interior 'self,' pretend to offer an 'authentic' voice—unalloyed subjective truth—and idealise individual agency" (Riessman, 2005, p. 6). Narrative approaches are not recommended for large studies and can require a great deal of time, significant attention to detail, and subtlety. Other challenges include the potential of participants over-personalising the narrative and engaging in what Pagano (1991) calls moral fictions—intentional or unintentional distortion. The accuracy of memory and recall are also issues.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) encourage narrative inquirers to be mindful and respectful of critics: "Our view is that every criticism is valid to some degree and contains the seed of an important point" (p. 181). The power of the personal in narrative, for example, is often identified as a concern. Spence (1986) notes that narrative inquirers can slip into trying to write perfect plots that they smooth out in order to make everything work out. Given that in narrative inquiry the participants' experiences are presented in their own voices within specific themes, however, there is no plot to be developed, no grand finale. In addition, given that one of the key emerging

themes in narrative inquiry is the metaphor of the journey, most participants see their stories of responsibility as an on-going and lifetime pursuit.

As with any research, care must be taken with narrative inquiry. Being cognizant and aware of the risks, including the relational nature of the work, is important. Thus. I have made explicit throughout how, as a participant researcher, my experience is inevitably "intermingled here" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 414). Although I have made clear my purpose, shared my own stories, and presented participants' stories in their own words, I recognize that choices in what I ask, how I ask, and what I select to write about influence this work. The same challenge is true for readers whose experiences and positionality influence the interpretation and understanding of the stories told. My hope is that readers will engage in what Clandinin and Connelly (1991) call the "believing game" (p. 278)—inserting themselves into the others' stories and making an earnest effort to share in the experiences of participants.

**Study Specifics**

Participants in this study are adults who occupy leadership roles in academia, business, and education, and who agreed to participate on a strictly voluntary basis. Participants were informed that they could, at any point, withdraw from the research. While there were no incentives offered for participation, potential participants were informed that participation was a contribution to scholarship and practice. Efforts have been taken to protect confidentiality including working with participants to disguise some details in their stories. All materials have been shared using a secure, password-protected platform. All participants were made aware that they would be expected to engage in multiple virtual interviews (at least two), and that the interviews would be recorded (video and/or audio). Consistent with the narrative approach, participants were also engaged in the co-creation of stories.

### *Cohorts and Participants*

Upon receiving ethics approval (Appendix B) for the present study, I began the process of recruiting participants. My intent was to recruit between three and five participants from each of three distinct but interconnected cohorts—scholars, educators, and practitioners. Participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria (discussed below). Ultimately, eleven participants were recruited. What connects the participants is how their career choices require and involve them to consider their responsibility to others and to broader societal interests. I am the twelfth participant in this study. For purpose of full disclosure, in addition to focussing my PhD on responsible leadership, I currently am an educator in the CEMS (The Global Alliance in Management Education) program from which educators for the research were recruited. In addition, at one point in my career, I was also a member of the Issues Management Council from which practitioners were recruited. While I have no impact or influence on the seasoned leaders who volunteered to participate in this research, my work history resonated with them and, as several noted, helped them understand my deep interest in their stories.

The recruitment criterion for the scholar cohort was that participants had authored books or published papers in peer-reviewed journals within the last ten years focussed on responsible leadership directly or on related topics such as leadership ethics, educational leadership, and corporate social responsibility. I identified and invited seven scholars to participate based on my reading of their work. I used public source information to contact them electronically. Ultimately, four scholars agree to participate after reviewing the approved letter of information and consent form (Appendix B) I shared with them. The scholar cohort includes two individuals who self-identify as male and two as female. As scholars, they range in experience from early mid-career to seasoned and tenured.

Inclusion in the educator cohort required participants to be teaching a seminar on global responsible leadership (RGL) in an internationally-acclaimed business development program called CEMS (www.cems.org). They are expected to create opportunities for their students to explore personal responsibility in the context of becoming a future leader or manager, to better understand themselves, and to appreciate how their personal values impact decision-making and in turn affect other people and society. Pedagogically, each seminar experience must demonstrate an "ethical and responsible approach to management education, including a strong focus on corporate social responsibility and sustainability issues" (www.cems.org). The three participants in this cohort all self-identify as male and are at mid to late stages in their careers. I used public sources including public websites related to the CEMS program to identify individuals to invite. I reached out via email and LinkedIn to 15 individuals at various schools around the world. Again, I offered educators the opportunity to voluntarily participate in this research and provided the approved letter of information and consent form.

The third cohort of participants comprises four leaders who are practitioners "responsible for managing strategic matters that affect [their] organization" (Issues Management Council website, homepage) and are members of the Issue Management Council. Issues leaders and issues managers are a unique and rarely studied group who by virtue of their professional mandate are expected to work with multiple internal and external stakeholders and to consider societal interests alongside economic interests in decision-making. Their role is to anticipate and, if possible, resolve problems to create "win/win resolutions that account for the positions and goals of all members in the stakeholder ecosystem" (Issue Management Council, 2018). They are expected to "consider and incorporate stakeholder expectations into relevant organizational strategies," and "be the nexus of "an outside-in cultural mindset and linkage between an

organization and its stakeholder ecosystem" (Issue Management Council, 2018). These leaders face pressure to conform to institutional norms and ensure minimal impact to their organization's brand, reputation, and bottom line. Three participants in this cohort self-identify as female and one as male. All are in later stages of their careers.

To recruit issue managers, I sent an email to the Issues Management Council's general (publicly available) mailbox. I was first contacted by an administrative professional to whom I outlined the research study and shared the approved letter of information. An executive of the organization followed up and was very supportive of sharing the opportunity to engage in the research with association members. An email (approved by Research Western) was sent subsequently by an administrative assistant (within the IMC). They used a distribution list and sent members a message regarding the opportunity to voluntarily participate in the research. Five interested parties reached out, and I provided them with the letter of information and consent form. One individual was unable to participate due to personal circumstances and dropped out before interviewing began. Of the other four, three self-identified as female and one as male.

***Interviewing***

Each participant committed to engage in a minimum of two interviews of approximately 45 minutes to one hour in duration. The interviews were conducted using ZOOM (a video conferencing technology), although one interview was done via phone and two were done using only the audio function in ZOOM. All were recorded. While in-person interviews would have been ideal, the breadth of locations in which participants resided precluded that option. The interviews took place in 2019 between May and December. I remained engaged with participants through the first half of 2020 and during the analysis and writing phases of the dissertation.

The value of the narrative approach stems in part from the techniques used to encourage storytellers—participants—not only to share their experiences, but to dig deep and "interpret the past, not just reproduce it" (Riessman, 2005, p. 6). My interview questions incorporated best practices in narrative inquiry such as beginning the interview "from a 'not knowing' position – rather than 'expert' position" (Etherington, 2013, p. 41). I framed questions purposefully to help participants engage fully, putting them at the heart of the research, asking them, for example, to "tell me about a time when" rather than "tell me about your experience of." This encouraged participants to consider the dimension of time and to broaden their thinking around an experience. Similarly, I tried to invite other characters into the story by asking questions such as "Who else was involved?" and to introduce temporal aspects by asking "When did that happen?" and "How long did that go on for?" I encouraged participants to recall details and to guide them through questions like "When did you realise that it couldn't go on?" and "What kind of sense did you make of all that?" in order to help them consider where there was a turning point, and what meaning they may have made of the experience. Drawing from Etherington (2013) and others, I asked questions which helped participants pay attention to cultural contexts; their senses and emotions; the significance of others; their own actions and choices; historical context; and metaphors, symbols, and creative, intuitive ways of knowing.

### *Respecting Stories*

Stories are at the heart of this work. Several participants shared how much they valued the opportunity to engage, tell and retell their stories, reflect and, as a result, better understand themselves. While their stories are in essence the data for this research, they are also so much more. I embrace the stories they shared as gifts given, and I have with intention and care strived to treasure and respect every word. I transcribed each interview and invited each participant to

edit the content. I also shared stories, verses, and ultimately chapters with participants. The participants did very little editing in terms of changing or deleting words; only two participants made minor revisions in one or two places. Five participants, however, added deeper descriptions of their experiences, describing their emotions and actions, and offering details about the time period or the scene where the story took place.

In some cases, my own stories emerge in participant transcripts as part of the natural back-and-forth dialogue that occurs in narrative inquiry. In some cases I answered questions that participants asked of me during our discussions. At times I offered a reflection from my own experience in response to their comments. In order to be thorough, I recorded myself answering the questions included in the interview guide (Appendix C). I then transcribed that recording along those of interviews with participants.

Mindful of Clandinin's touchstones, I attempted throughout the interview process to meet each participant where they were, to respect their need for flexibility in terms of timing related to interviews and editing, and to respect the fact that each person engages from their own place of comfort. Some interviews were emotional, others matter-of-fact. Some focussed heavily on responsibility as a lifelong journey, weaving together their personal and professional experiences, while others stayed focussed on their professional stories.

### *Co-Creating Stories*

I was mindful throughout the interviews that in narrative inquiry, stories are co-created—that part of my role was to co-create stories by recording participants' experience in writing. Thus, I attended carefully to Etherington's (2013) key message around building and maintaining trust and openness in the research relationship. Doing so required engaging in an ethical manner, aligning with participants on a shared commitment to collaborate, and doing so sincerely.

Etherington's (2013) recommendation to ensure there is reflexive engagement was valuable as I recognized the occasional need to reengage with some participants to discuss nuances of speech, and the meaning of some words, expressions, analogies, and metaphors. In one instance, the words I was reading seemed to have a humorous tone, but I did not remember the conversation that way. Having a video recording of the interview allowed me to revisit the segment. In this case, I also reconnected with the participant and confirmed the interpretation. Although situations such as this happened only three times, I valued the interview recordings and having built enough of a relationship with the participants that they were happy to ensure my understanding and interpretation was correct.

In our discussions, several participants asked for my reaction, my own stories, and my own learnings from experience. Given the professional maturity of participants, I interpreted their questions as an honest effort to better understand me as the researcher. The back-and-forth triggered further discussion and engagement. Related to the perspective that success in narrative inquiry requires being prepared to tolerate ambiguity, to value signs, symbols and metaphors, and to use multiple data sources, I again found Etherington's (2013) guidance helpful. For example, I found that while some participants shared stories in a precise and detailed way, others were more ambiguous. Some participants shared their stories in a complex manner in terms of how specifics were brought forward and how the story was shared temporally. In a couple of cases, individuals struggled to remember details about the place and time, or about their emotions or other reactions. This is also where returning for further conversation was both rewarding for me as the researcher and, in many cases, for participants who wanted to "talk through it again."

Following each interview, I provided participants with an unedited copy of the transcript for review. Having taken extensive field notes and with initial input from participants, I then read and re-read the transcripts and began identifying the stories told and the learnings the tellers were sharing. I referenced my field notes (written during the interviews themselves) often and on four occasions specifically went back to the video and/or audio recordings for clarification. On occasion, where the words alone left me with questions regarding meaning, facial expressions and tone were helpful.

After some minor editing, and to be transparent, I shared the stories and my own writings with participants, hoping to continue to build relationship. Participants were then able electronically or through further conversation (over the ZOOM platform) to re-story their stories. In some instances, participants edited their transcript online or, in a following discussion, retold their story based on reflections or upon remembering additional details. In so doing, their ability to make meaning from their experiences sharpened. I encouraged them throughout to reflect and share their meaning-making, and to consider and provide their thoughts about the metaphors, analogies, and other literary devices they used in their stories.

### *Analyzing the Stories*

Narrative analysis transcends the asking of deep and penetrating questions—it is much more than simply telling stories (Etherington, 2013). A narrative inquiry is an analytic examination of the insights and assumptions underlying the story that is told. Narrative analysis treats stories as knowledge which then constitutes "the social reality of the narrator" and "conveys a sense of that person's experience in its depth, messiness, richness and texture, by using the actual words spoken" (p. 8). Analysis (meaning-making) occurs throughout the research process rather than as a separate activity after data collection (Gerhart, Tarragona, &

Bava, 2007). The emphasis is on the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants. Through the process, both parties negotiate the meaning of the stories, adding a validation check to the analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Engaging in this work, I recognized the need for a rigorous process in terms of analysis. Thus, I followed a reflexive process of moving from field (with starting points in telling or living of stories) to field texts (data) to interim and final research texts. I looked for the ways in which "commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place create a conceptual framework within which different kinds of field texts and different analyses can be used" (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 436). I also considered Etherington's (2013) guidance about data analysis and considered my reactions to the stories told in terms of what I believe, what I doubt, and what touches me. These questions led me back to the stories themselves and at times back to the participants. I also analyzed the explicit content, the discourse, and the context of each story, searching for insights and understandings.

Various methods of analysis are associated with narrative inquiry, each providing a way to systematically study personal narratives of experience. According to Etherington (2013), "stories can be viewed as a window onto a knowable reality analyzed using concepts derived from theory" (p. 7). Riessman (2005) identifies four commonly used methods: thematic, structural, interactional, and performative analysis. Thematic analysis involves placing emphasis on what is said more than how it is said—on what is told rather than telling; in structural-analysis, the focus shifts to the telling or the way a story is told; with interactional analysis, the emphasis is on the dialogic process between teller and listener; and with performative analysis, the focus transcends the interactional approach—as the stage metaphor implies, storytelling is seen as performance by an individual who uses language and gesture to compel an audience.

Reissman (2005) notes that while the lines between these four methods is fluid, each requires researchers to select and organise documents, compose field notes, and choose sections of interview transcripts for intense scrutiny—because "narratives do not speak for themselves or have unanalysed merit; they require interpretation" (p. 6). Gerhart, Tarragona, & Bava (2007) further note that meaning-making occurs throughout the research process rather than as a separate activity. They encourage researchers to emphasize co-construction between themselves and participants and to approach data gathering and analysis as a harmonious single process which evolves organically.

***Meaning-Making***

While I explicitly asked participants at the end of interviews about their learnings from experience and the meaning they make from engaging in telling and retelling stories, many valuable comments about meaning-making emerge from within the stories themselves. As participants went back and forth through time and space telling their stories and often coming back to certain stories, the words spoken (often messy, not grammatically perfect, and non-linear) are imbued with meaning and learning. I noted these down and refer to them as insights. I am again reminded of Richardson (1994) encouraging researchers not to worry, as writers, about "getting it right, only getting it differently contoured and nuanced" (p. 521). In expressing themselves, recollecting, reframing, and returning to moments, participants shared the richness of their experience as opposed to focussing on the perfection of their diction.

Throughout my inquiry, I took care to work iteratively with participants, reading transcripts, reviewing my interview notes, seeking clarification where needed, and following up in subsequent interviews. Throughout this process, I read the words and stories purposefully and intentionally. I strove to be present, engaged, and in the moment with what I was reading, and

not to reflect on what came before or what might come after. I simply noted what I was hearing the participants saying about their experiences—about how they felt, the context they were in, their environment, who they were in relationship with, their struggles, their messages, their learnings and take-aways. I was not concerned at this point with their language or grammar. Nor was I being mindful in my own use of words to describe what I was hearing.

In the process of meaning-making, I found myself drawn to sections of interview transcripts in which the storytellers themselves use various literary devices including analogies, clichés, idioms, and metaphors in their narratives. By bringing forward their experiences using these literary devices, participants paint vivid and vibrant images which offer a lens through which to explore their stories and tease out insights and themes within and across their shared experiences. As Cassirer (1944) notes, "Symbolic thought and symbolic behaviour are among the most characteristic features of human life, and that the whole progress of human culture is based on these conditions is undeniable" (p. 27). The use of literary devices as tools to aid one's thinking (Aubusson, 2004) is well recognized as is their value in the interpretation of research findings.

Upon recognizing participants' use of literary devices, I began to highlight them and make notes about them. I do not believe that participants set out intentionally to use these devices, but it was common for participants to use an analogy or cliché, or a common phrase, idiom, or metaphor to describe their experience of no longer being able to balance personal and organizational values. In so doing, one participant referred to feeling like they had hit a wall. Another participant said they learned where their line in the sand was. Yet another described putting a stake in the ground. In describing the challenges faced in making responsible decisions, one participant said it felt like they were walking a tight rope. Another participant speaks about

sailing in dangerous waters, while another described living with a knot in their stomach. It is not that all participants used literary devices to describe their experiences and learnings, but many did. I found many of the descriptions very powerful, evoking in me an emotional reaction.

While valuable in solving problems and creating shared understanding (Keefer & Landua, 2016), literary devices can also be problematic. They can create confusion based on language and culture. Charteris-Black (2000) showed how foreign students struggle with metaphorical expressions when they must attend lectures in English. In addition, use of literary devices can constrain reasoning, lead to misunderstandings, and inadvertently reinforce stereotypes (Taylor & Dewsbury, 2018). An everyday familiar analogy or phrase in one field or country can have very different meanings elsewhere. Thus, in my conversations with participants, I encouraged them to elaborate upon their use of these devices. Ultimately, I did not use the literary devices to describe the themes themselves, but readers will recognize some of them within the stories.

As I worked with each participant, I initially identified dozens of themes. Over time, as I continued to read and re-read their stories, review my interview notes and analysis, and engage and clarify understandings with participants, similarities and points of connection became evident. Through the process of writing and re-writing, I reframed what I had been calling themes as insights. By insights I mean specific messages, learnings, lessons, and take-aways that participants shared in the stories they told about their experiences of being at the point of impingement—about feeling the pressure of opposing norms and values in making a business decision. Ultimately, I distilled my list of themes down to five unique but still interconnected insights about what participants have learned from experiences making decisions responsibly. As I share in Chapter Five the stories participants tell, I describe these insights and offer some

perspective about the participants—providing context without divulging details related to their identity. The insights are to start by understanding why responsibility matters to you and to engage with others—in other words do not go at it alone. Remember that preparation is key and that being responsible in decision-making is a strategic endeavour. The final insight revolves around keeping focused by learning continuously and growing your resilience. I am mindful of Spence's (1986) warning not to try to create a piece of work that is like a Hollywood plot, that ties everything together perfectly. I acknowledge that I have likely been unable to discern and bring forward all the nuances of the participants' experiences.

**Ethics**

I have exercised care and paid attention at every stage of this inquiry to ensure ethical best practices have been followed from initial design to engagement with participants, and from analysis to reporting (Vanclay, Baines & Taylor, 2013). I provided all participants with a letter of information and a consent form. I acquired their consent including permission to record interviews before interviews began. Participation was completely voluntary; I exerted no coercion or deception, and I informed participants about their right to withdraw at any time. I have made effort to preserve confidentiality and gave participants opportunity to check and modify the transcripts and their stories, and the final work will be shared with all participants. I have implemented data protection measures.

While narrative researchers are expected to comply with legal and procedural expectations such as those above established by ethics review boards in institutions and organizations engaged in research, scholars such as Clandinin (2013) insist they are insufficient given the in-depth, relational interaction and engagement that evolves in this form of inquiry. Narrative inquirers come to be in relation with participants and thus must also focus on relational

responsibilities. “The ethical considerations in narrative inquiries are commonly thought of as responsibilities negotiated by participants at all phases of the inquiry” (Clandinin, 2013, p.199). For example, narrative researchers do not ask questions to generate answers, nor do they focus on facts or presenting quotes to support a point. Narrative inquirers and their participants agree to engage collaboratively and welcome one another into each others’ lives. Stories are told, shared, and co-created, so that, as Clandinin notes, “the complexity of lives are made visible” (p. 200). Engaging with one another in this way requires that ethical matters be kept to the fore, not simply signed off on at the beginning of the research project. Researchers must remain diligent and attentive in their relations with participants, as they are privy to and part of their stories of experience. As such, researchers must be mindful of engaging openly, creating and maintaining an environment where there is mutual responsibility, reciprocity, care, and a commitment to move beyond the concept of “do no harm” toward an “attitude of empathetic listening, of not being judgmental and of suspending disbelief as they attend to participants’ stories” (Clandinin, 2013, p.199). I have realized through this inquiry how privileged a researcher is to be given the gift of story. With the gift, however ,comes responsibility.

> We are not merely objective inquirers . . . people who study a world we did not help create. On the contrary, we are complicit in the world we study. Being in this world we must make ourselves as well as offer up research understandings that could lead to a better world. (Clandinin and Connelly, 2001, p. 61)

While I have worked with participants and honor their narrative authority (Olson, 1995), I now recognize how, as the researcher, I ultimately make choices in terms of what stories are presented. Clandinin (2013) notes that the choices researchers make reflect what we believe to be significant. The purpose I and other narrative researchers have in presenting the stories we

present is to “disrupt common understandings, perceptions and practices” (p.201). This recognition reinforces my commitment to continue to engage in a manner that respects the relational responsibilities with my participants.

**Conclusion**

I engaged with research participants for almost a year, and I feel as though I have developed a personal, unique connection with each one. As a narrative inquiry, the present study examines experience through the lens of the stories told, beginning with “experience as expressed in lived and told stories” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 40) and ending by offering readers “a place to imagine their own uses and applications” (p. 42). Participants are storytellers in this work, I am a participant researcher, and this work is a collaboration over time, an exploration of a phenomenon—specifically, of the experience of making responsible decisions. No grand truths, grand theories, or grand answers come from this work. Rather, through the sharing of learnings and meanings emerges hope toward a future in which responsibility to others is more widely discussed, understood, and practiced.

## Chapter Five: Insights Emerge From Stories of Experience

"Research is a personal venture which, quite aside from its social benefits, is worth doing for its direct contribution to one's own self-realization," (Mooney, 1957, p. 155). Mooney's notion of the value of research rings true for me and, as I have learned, for my research participants—who made comments during the interviews such as "I never thought about that before," "I guess those things are connected!" and, "Just hearing myself say it is exciting." As a researcher, I have found points of connection with the experience of others and found myself growing ever more curious about the meaning I make from my lived experience.

As a narrative inquirer, I want to present the real-life experiences of research participants to a larger audience (Reissman, 2008), and to share rich descriptions of the meanings they draw from their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this work, I recognize learning as a "process of creating or constructing knowledge" (Day et al., 2009, p. 147) that can occur based on personal experience and through "others' experience" (p. 158). Adult learners can create knowledge by reflecting on the stories of others as well on as their own learnings (Day, et al., 2009), and "the knowledge gained can offer the reader a deeper understanding of the subject material and extra insight to apply the stories to their own context" (Wang & Geale, 2015, p. 196). This chapter is dedicated to sharing the breadth and depth of participant stories and creating opportunity for reflection and learning.

### Insights from Participants

Through a rigorous thematic analysis of participants' stories, I identified what I refer to as insights. These reflect the learnings, lessons, key messages, and take-aways which emerge from the stories participants tell of their experiences at the point of impingement—at the intersection of multiple and often conflicting norms and values. The first insight speaks to the

importance of coming to understand why responsibility matters individually. The second focuses on value and necessity of engaging with others—specifically building a support system and a network of like-minded people. Third is the insight that being responsible in decision-making requires preparation and fourth, that is a strategic endeavour. The final insight revolves around keeping focused on responsibility by learning continuously and growing resilience.

Insights relate to themes that emerged in the stories shared by at least eight participants. In presenting the insights, I first provide some context related to the theme. Where appropriate, I also draw out subtopics or specific aspects of the insights which offer interesting nuances for consideration. In order to maintain the anonymity of participants, I identify them based on their cohort only. Occasionally and where relevant to the story, I offer brief descriptions of career history or other life experiences.

**Understand Why Responsibility Matters to You**

Embodied in this insight are three key sub-topics: explore your origin story or stories, create your personal dictionary, and define your limits. Together they speak to the work participants have done personally to better understand themselves in relation to the topic of responsibility. Doing so emerges as important for participants as they have needed to make decisions which being squeezed by opposing expectations. An important point is that although participants talk about needing to do this work personally, they do not say that they did the work alone. There is a strong relational component to the learning and meaning making which underpins this insight. As such, understanding why responsibility matters involves and includes engagement with others which is the second insight.

### *Explore Your Origin Story*

Taking the time to consider one's 'origin' story, stories of why being responsible came to matter so deeply, emerges as essential to making meaning. Taking the time to consider their past resulted in participants developing a better understanding of their present and even helps them imagine their future. Participants reflect on recent events and those from their childhood. In terms of the context of their experiences, some stem from formal settings such those taking place at work or in an educational setting, but the majority stem from informal, unplanned ,and often unwelcome experiences through which they had to navigate. Developing an understanding of responsibility, then, requires intentionality (the desire to do so), but also the commitment to reflect and learn. For many, the memories are from their childhood. Others remember messages which they have internalized—messages from parents, teachers, books they have read, colleagues, and mentors. Some reflect on lessons from their religious upbringing, their travels, and from living in different cultures. Several participants consider the impact and influence of traumatic or significant events in their lives as being instrumental to their perspectives.

Given the wealth of stories worthy of sharing, I haven chosen in this section to focus on the stories of four participants who connect experiences in childhood and young adulthood with their decision-making as leaders. These stories demonstrate how story-telling involves "looking inward and outward, backward and forward" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 417), tying together the past and the present, and providing the opportunity to think about the future.

**Origin Story 1.** Having been born in the United States, this scholar has lived and worked internationally. They share how lived experiences have defined how responsibility is now central to their way of being. Beginning with a defining incident as a child, this participant explains how being responsible was, at first, thrust upon them,

> I am [the] firstborn child [in a family] of three children, and my parents were in a really bad car crash when I was six. My sister and brother were younger. My parents were hospitalized for about six months and we stayed with my grandparents and we were really moved around from kind of pillar to post and at the point when my mother finally came out of hospital—well, she came out earlier than she should have come out because, basically, they were going to put us in an orphanage because there was just no place for us to go anymore. So I basically was responsible very early on for my siblings.
>
> I remember the morning of the accident. The neighbors were gathered in our doorway, and I remember my brother and my sister getting into bed with me, and we were like what's going on? They were looking, you know at me, like I had to figure out what was going on. After my parents came back from hospital, the family really started to disintegrate. And through it all my mother relied on me to be very responsible. So responsibility was something that my family situation really grew me toward being.
>
> I worked from a very early age and I was always responsible. My mom was working nights and I was responsible for the family. She would discuss the finances with me and where we're going to get enough money for this and that, so I took on a lot of responsibility from a young age. And so I think because of that I often saw myself as the one, you know, the one to step up and step into things. It was kind of something that I just did. Something I learned to do very early on.

Stories this participant shares transcend space and time, involve others, and highlight how their present and future are influenced by past experiences with responsibility. Making connections through engaging in story telling, the participant repeatedly comments on how they recognize connections between experiences that they previously thought were separate or distinct.

> You know, that's interesting. When I was 17, I was a member of our high school band. And I loved it. I was a musician and I loved band. Right before senior year in high school, our revered music teacher left. And the new band director was dreadful. Not just in his teaching, but he was dreadful in his practices. He was horrible and band attendance started to dwindle and, you know, it all started to slip away. Anyway, I got so upset about it that I wrote a letter to our town newspaper. I got a bunch of other people to sign it with me. The thing is, I mean, I was so stupid. I should have just gone to the principal of the high school, but I didn't do that. I stepped right out. I stepped right out because the band was so important to me, to my friends, and it was a community thing. I took responsibility and guess what? The whole thing completely exploded, it ended up in court, a libel case.
>
> Thinking about it now, that band director, the original director, you know that was so organized. You know, it (band) was my family and it was the family that I could get away to. That is what he created. There was somebody else, you know, that was such a responsible leader and he took the responsibility. Thinking about it now, band was a place where I could be a kid. And so when he left and this new chaotic guy came on, I guess, wow, it was like my real family. I had to do something. I had to take responsibility because no one else was. So maybe all this is kind of connected.

After making this connection, the scholar moved forward in time and started telling a story about how as a young academic and educator, they approached a challenging situation. In moving forward and then backward, they started making further connections.

> Thinking on it now, there is connection. Professionally, I have learned from my experience in band. I hadn't really connected it before. But that's where I learned about

> the importance of trying to work channels, rather than stepping out of channels. You know I am thinking of an experience when I was at a university, I wasn't a professor yet. This new director was brought in and they were just terrible. I wasn't the ringleader this time, but I was kind of part of the instigating team. I said, “Look, we got to work the channels here.” We can't just step out, and I brought what I learned from high school. You know, I learned with those kinds of thing that you need to know the politics of these things. Oh, it's just so difficult. And you have to understand the whole thing, not just the part you care about. Through the years at various stages when I have seen other organizations that I've loved falling apart because of bad leadership, this all comes back to me.

**Origin Story 2.** This participant from the IMC cohort shared with me during our first discussion how they actively engage in reflection and mindfulness practices. Initially, they tied these practices to helping them navigate their high-profile, challenging, and high-pressure role managing issues and crises. Following an intensive discussion about their professional role, rich stories about their lived experience surviving two near-fatal accidents as a child emerged. Moving backward and then forward to an experience as a young adult, they described how they still vividly recall overhearing words shared amongst family members.

> After college, I was driving to a new state with my partner. We had our cars out and our pets, and all of our stuff and we were moving. We had a whole life ahead of us. She was killed. In a head-on collision. Right behind me. It was in the wee hours of the morning. It was dark like at five in the morning. Hugely traumatic. I was completely shattered for a while and slowly, slowly I was kind of getting myself back together. I had been involved in two other accidents years earlier and had survived. And I remember I was sort of

> asleep on the couch, but kind of just waking up and I heard my parents talking in a room nearby. My dad was saying, “What do you suppose she's being saved for? She’s being saved for a purpose.” His words have stayed with me.

Having shared this story and recalling their father’s words, this participant made connection with a recent situation at work. Finding themselves in the middle of a crisis where decisions had implications on not only employees and the company, but on tens of thousands of people living in various communities, this participant was given a very specific directive from a senior leader. The directive was tied to economic and organizational priorities which the participant understood but was not comfortable with. Given the implications and ramifications on stakeholders, they distinctly remember thinking that someone had to step up and do the responsible thing. As they shared the story, they made connection back to their father’s words as well as a story they themselves had read about.

> I know sometimes people do things because they're told to do things, even if, morally, they're not the right thing to do. I know they get themselves morally off the hook by saying a superior said you must do this or don’t do that. I'm just saying that this was one of the things that came into my mind when I was given the directive. It just wasn't possible for me. I wasn’t just going to take a hands-off approach like I was told to. But I had to figure out a way to do it. It was my purpose at that moment. I had to do something responsible that would still be mildly palatable to my management.
>
> I remember in that moment reading about this leader from Vietnam who ended up massacring an entire village because he and his troops were ordered to do so. And then, he said in his defence that he didn’t do anything wrong. I wasn’t going to use that defence. So I had to find another way. I had a purpose, and I knew I had to find a way.

> Ultimately, I found a creative approach where ostensibly I decided to do something way above my pay grade. I said to everyone this is what we are going to do and how. And I also made it clear that it was on me.

During a second interview with this participant, they built upon the impact and influence of their childhood experiences. Sharing multiple stories from what was in many ways a childhood of privilege, they shared complexities stemming for their parents' choice to actively support the black civil rights movement and open their home to ex-convicts to help in rehabilitation. This participant again references the concept of having purpose and embraces the concept of responsibility as being at once challenging and rewarding.

> There's something in experiencing difficult, painful things that helps with building a sense of purpose. There's a sense of attitude that comes from realizing you have choice in terms of what you do with your experience. Growing up there were always tensions between doing what was right and how other people interpreted what you were doing. And so, I lived through kind of understanding what happens when you do what you think is right, but others don't see it that way.
>
> I watched my dad, who was doing things that at the time I didn't get, but in hindsight it was a big deal. You know, this was a time when nothing was guaranteed. Civil rights, the equal housing laws were just being passed right around this time and because my farther supported a black family who came to our community, we had a cross burned on our front lawn. They were the only people of colour in our town at the time and many people were very uncomfortable. Members of the community were actually mad at my father. People would call in the middle of the night and say how they were going to hurt my father for supporting the black family. There were tensions!

> I was white. I had privilege. I had, you know, all sorts of opportunities. Yet, I had very first-hand personal experience watching what was happening to our friends of colour. I was in like third or fourth grade when this happened. And so, for me, there was just always this thing that we did in our family. We even had a parade of ex-cons that lived with us. My sister moved in my bedroom and they got her room and I learned to hotwire a car and get high off the spices in my mom's kitchen. I mean, we learned some incredible things. It was awesome, really, to find out like that guy in my kitchen, the one making eggs, like he killed his uncle when he was 15! That was heavy. This life of mine has led me to thinking about the good, the bad, and the ugly of my history and realizing that everybody has those things. For some reason we were always involved with this complicated stuff—helping people navigate. I didn't realize until I was older how these experiences shaped me and how I think about things.

**Origin Story 3.** This educator lived in various countries during their childhood and youth. They explain how their experiences living internationally, their education, and their family values continue to influence their perspectives on responsibility.

> My earliest memories of the concept of responsibility stems from attending a private school in Singapore. Even though it was a private school there was a focus on doing social service. Like, looking after the elderly. There were things we were expected and were taught were the right things to do. You know, we'd go to people's homes and help them, and talk to them and so do things like that—to make time to give a helping hand. That was part of the philosophy of the school. So I think a social conscience was developed at school.

> I remember toward the end of my dad's posting in Singapore, he was offered a job in South Africa. And this was in the midst of the apartheid regime and my brother and I made it absolutely clear that we weren't going. We were not supportive of that move. We were 15 and 14. We felt moving to South Africa would go against all the values that had been instilled in us. We said so and our father, he was taken very much aback. I'd like to believe our standpoint influenced his decision. We never ended up never going to South Africa. And as a result, I felt, you know, like I took a stand. Sure it was with my dad, but my brother and I took a stand and, in a way, ever since then, we've certainly learned that it is possible. Stands can be taken. I'm sure it would have been a sizable promotion for my father, but we had strong convictions even at that time. It probably came across as teenagers being difficult, but I think he understood this was deeply rooted and would cause some significant issues.

In the world of work, this same participant traces how their professional choices continue to be influenced by their childhood,

> When I found myself in a very different reality in the workplace, I challenged the establishment. You know, even as a junior employee, I stood up for certain things and raised issues that were uncomfortable to senior leadership. You know, it was just part of my upbringing. In the industry I was in, we, for example, had so few ethnic minorities and women. The question being asked was what is it about our culture and how we recruit that was turning off those groups? In fact, the real issue I noticed was that members of these groups weren't even applying! It wasn't even a question of we were not hiring them—they just weren't applying for those jobs. So I got involved with the student recruitment side and the mentoring program. And of course, some of the old guard or

> some of those coming from a different kind of privilege and educational background felt very differently than I did based on their own experiences and they preferred, you know, the same kind of men as themselves, the same kind of environment in the workplace. I think there's a little bit about how one is brought up that does color your kind of base DNA.

**Origin Story 4.** This participant from the IMC cohort reflects on their upbringing and ties together how faith and the impact of their mother's life-long commitment to help others has had an immense influence on most aspects of her life.

> For me it is about protecting people who can't do it (protect) themselves or at least can't do it, not alone. I think it goes back in time. I was brought up in the United Church which is not strictly religious but does focus intensely on the importance of caring for others. As a young child I remember the teaching and Sunday school and I remember talking about what's right and what's wrong. My mother especially talked all the time about how we make decisions and why and whom we impact and influence. I guess it is not surprising that I have spent many years in health care and in municipal government. There are a lot of stakeholders you are responsible to in these fields of work. Although we have to worry about budgets, the work I do is fundamentally about thinking about who needs to be heard that isn't, who can't advocate for themselves or their interests. I can hear the words at home and at church: "Make sure you think about them and what they need."

Reflecting on an incident near the beginning of their career, this practitioner recalls a school bus accident where the vehicle ended up hanging over the edge of an extremely high bridge. It was all hands-on deck at the hospital. In their role, they explicitly remember at one point thinking about what was most important to the family of the patients rather than to the

organization and its processes. They described taking “a leap of faith” to do what they felt was truly responsible:

> I remember thinking that's the scariest thing I could ever imagine for a parent. And the parents were all calling in. I decided to deal with those calls and I put myself in the place of the parents and tried to talk to them like that. Doing that kind of work isn’t just about doing your job. You have to put yourself in the place of other people and figure out what is right to do. Handling those calls from the parents’ perspective as opposed to reading a prepared statement—I remember thinking, what would be right? What would I hope for, treated like? What is right or responsible to them?

Thus in terms of being responsible in their decision-making, participants highlight the importance of knowing one’s own story and one’s self in terms of priorities and values. Doing so, however ,emerges as a complex process that takes time and experience and requires reflection. The concept of reflection transcends experiences in the world of work, but hearkens back into childhood and young adulthood where many participants identify their foundations having been laid. I conclude sharing a final reflection from the previous participant and IMC member whose stories span the present, the past, and consideration of the future.

> I remember being bullied as a child and seeing others being bullied. And I remember that finally at one point I fought back, and the bullying stopped. In a way I took my own power, the power to decide what I was going to do and knowing that I had to live with the consequences. That’s what I think responsibility is about—when you know something is wrong and it is doing harm or could. Recognizing you can be the one to be responsible. Doing something with whatever power you have and being okay living with the

consequences. Sometimes the only power you have is to decide what is right for you. I don't think I've ever quite thought about it that way. I'm going to remember this.

I struggled to choose the origin stories to share in this work. Given restraints of time and space, I hope the stories shared highlight the value participants place on connecting back with how and when, why and where responsibility became important to them. In telling and re-telling their stories further connections appear and serve to both help with self discovery but also in informs their practice and approach to making responsible decisions.

***Develop a Personal Dictionary***

One of the most ubiquitously discussed insights is the criticality of defining one's own values, definitions, and expectations related to concepts such as responsibility. Many participants spoke about needing to develop a personal understanding of what concepts such as ethics, failure, morals, and values mean. One participant in the educator cohort says that one of the most challenging learnings in their young professional life was realizing how different people understand these concepts: "I thought no way this guy thinks this is okay. But he did and I was, like, how is that possible?" Associated with this perspective is discussion of the inevitable need to work with people who do have very different perspectives. The educator quoted above says, "I had to learn to accept that no matter how nice I thought someone was or how much I may like them, that in business I'm going to have to accept they think differently. Sometimes way differently." The educator identifies ways of personally negotiating through these discomfiting situations: They categorize whether they can disagree but respect someone's approach; accept it and work with them to find common ground; not like it and distance themselves; or feel compelled to contest and confront.

Stories include references to developing a moral compass or having a north star. Definitions and expectations are not described as static but as evergreen. One participant spoke about having the "same roots but needing to learn how to adapt" as roots shifted underground to find sustenance.

The stories shared by participants highlight how coming to understand responsibility has been at once a personal undertaking which requires engaging with one's own story—unpacking multiple and often complex events and memories such as the effect of trauma or the influence of education, faith, or a specific individual in their life. On the other hand, understanding responsibility is also discussed as a collaborative activity which requires building relationships with stakeholders, understanding the needs and expectations of others, and having the support of others. Participants explain that their understanding of being responsible is influenced by many internal and external factors including their own positionality and history, today's context, and the risks associated with questioning norms and values. At the same time they talk about the challenge of realizing that all these same dynamics and complexities exist in terms of the stakeholders they work with.

It is important to mention that participants do not define responsibility based on laws or regulations, nor do they refer to statements made by organizations, institutions, or external sources. Participants talk about their relationship with responsibility as emerging, forming, and evolving over time. Participants share their experiences coming to define and understand responsibility in many ways. For many, their perspectives stem from experiences in which they personally felt challenged, recognized the consequences of irresponsible actions, or recognized the need to reflect upon their own choice whether to be a bystander or to engage actively.

A participant from the IMC cohort said that after decades in leadership positions, they have come to recognize that being responsible in terms of their decisions means "taking your own internal mettle and ethics and values and putting them right into your daily practice at work—who you listen to, what you decide, matters; how far are you willing to go to stand-up for something?" For another participant, an educator who spent almost two decades in corporate life and in consulting, being responsible is not about proclamations or statements, but rather about what one does:

> It means empowering people to walk away from certain kinds of business that may be irresponsible or have negative impacts. It means developing your own and others' qualities to stand up to a board and say why they must walk away from a very large project. In a corporate sense, being a responsible leader is vital but requires implementing and integrating responsibility into not only your values on paper, but the ways in which you behave and operate in your daily business life.

A mid-career scholar and educator whose research focusses on the education of K-12 students in the United States explains that their understanding of responsibility has evolved and is now about how they can themselves answer the question, "What is my purpose?"

> Responsibility is thinking, playing with this idea of what right is and having the confidence and courage to do what's right for your stakeholders, even if it means sometimes not necessarily doing what's easy or good for you.

Another academic with work experience in the for-profit sector and in consulting says that, for them, responsibility has evolved from a simplistic view of "doing good" to "acting in accordance with the expectations and values of those you're interacting with, those you're impacting and affecting." This educator says that after working in business, across sectors, and

internationally, they recognize being responsible in decision-making as being purposive and deliberate each day:

> There are three basic questions that I ask myself, numerous times every single day. As situations are occurring, I'm thinking to myself, which one of my stakeholders are affected? How? And in terms of hierarchy and impact of needs, where is this? Everyday I do that. I've learned to have that kind of commitment, to be conscious. I say that now because I have learned the consequences of not doing that. People will say that's too much work, but I've learned what happens when I don't do that.

Yet another educator who had been in multiple leadership roles in industry shares the story of a "life changing experience" at a training program held at the National Training Laboratory for Applied Behavioral Sciences in the United States:

> One of the main themes of the program was understanding systemic oppression in our society. I went in thinking; I listen to people and I am a responsible leader. But what I realized is that I am part of the oppression—against women, people of color, those whose histories aren't like mine. Maybe unwittingly, sure, but I realized how it manifested in choices I made, who I listened to. Just walking into a room as a white male, I learned how I can oppress others, how they may withhold their own opinions and perspectives. Going in, I thought I was responsible as a leader; I was inclusive, for example, because I invited people to participate in decision-making processes. But I learned how insufficient my understanding was. I never thought to look or even consider that being responsible is recognizing that people may not actually be participating. Being responsible in that situation means choosing to explore why that may be the case.

A practitioner and member of the IMC has dealt with significant issues related to environment, health, and safety in manufacturing, and believes that being responsible starts internally and is about personal choice:

> It starts from wanting to know what the right thing is—in any situation. To at least question and think about what is right. Not make assumptions or follow others without questioning. It's irresponsible to not want to know what the right thing is. Then, it's about doing the right thing. Doing the right thing when no one else is watching. And doing the right thing and influencing others to do the right thing, when they don't want to do the right thing. I would say that is responsibility.

In sharing their story of trying to influence policy and work with other leaders on corporate decisions and business strategies, this participant highlights the importance of having courage to call out those who speak disrespectfully about external stakeholders. Learning from mentors who demonstrated respect for alternative opinions and perspectives, this participant developed the confidence to advocate for those without a voice at the decision-making table. Pushing themselves and coaching their own employees to speak up and change the discourse is a priority for this participant who critiques the tendency to "boil everything down to win-lose scenarios and to demonize those with other perspectives."

### *Define Your Own Limits*

This subtopic emerges in part from having understood why responsibility matters to you and taking the time to define what associated concepts mean personally. What emerges here is how participants have experienced making difficult decisions to leave roles, departments, organizations, and even entire fields. Many colourful metaphors, analogies, and idioms emerge in their stories about "having a line in the sand" and "knowing when to call it quits." While the

need for compromise and negotiation is part of the equation, specific discussion about needing to know when to "cut ties," "draw a line," "throw oneself on the sword" or "under the bus," face "the point of no return," and "know your non-negotiables" are ubiquitous.

Participants acknowledge that making such decisions are stressful and not to be taken lightly. At the same time, every participant reflects positively on the choices they made. While some participants discuss considering in hindsight what they could have done better, none say they regret their decisions. Having made tough choices or having had to deal with being asked to leave are recognized as pivotal learning opportunities from which they have strengthened their resolve. One participant, Now an academic, spent several years in the world of corporate social responsibility, working as a consultant to assist organizations to engrain the needs of others into their decision-making:

> I remember having worked in a community in Latin America where one of our clients was planning to invest and build. I came back to the institution, and I just said to them, "They (the community) don't want development and we shouldn't force dialogue—that's not what they want." My colleagues just looked at me and one colleague, I remember, said to me, "You're always so critical, why you are so critical?" I kept trying to explain this perspective to a lot of my colleagues and superiors at the institution. I remember one moment specifically. It was just me with my former director and I was saying, "Well, sometimes the best option is just to leave things, communities and people, the way they are." And he said, "Look, this is not the place to be ideological because if you want to be ideological, then you shouldn't be here." And so, it was interesting for me that he thought that it was ideological for me to say that if we want to truly address these issues and respect the country and the people in it, that maybe we should tell the company who hired

> us to go elsewhere. He often reminded me moving forward that the companies didn't pay us for philosophical conversations with them; “They pay for solutions and advice on how to resolve their issues.” So I got pushback. What I was trying to show is that there are very different notions of responsibility.

This scholar found their health, well-being, and relationships with family and friends suffering as a result of being in this environment. They note feeling “like an outsider” and “struggling, I really, really struggled for those years of being in that environment.” Noting that while it was probably the best job in terms of salary and perks that they will ever have, they acknowledge how the disconnect between their values and the actual day-to-day reality in the role affected them: “You know, I never slept. And you know what else? I have never slept as well as after I left that place.”

A participant from the RGL cohort described an experience early in their career that set the precedent for embracing reflection, taking the time to think critically, being willing to recalibrate based on values, and course-correct despite financial impact and loss of positional status:

> I remember in my formative years building my career I was in a company that had for years been held in high regard. I worked with people who were very good professionals. They were decent, well-educated, very nice people who saw themselves and the organization as having an ethical compass. I never saw anything at the company that would make me question leadership or management ethics.
>
> I was in my mid 20s. It . . . ended up being a pretty formative experience. A lot of things started happening and we had facilities firebombed by protestors, and, suddenly, me and these people I worked with had to have police escorts to get into the office because

> people were throwing stones at us. Suddenly, there I am facing direct confrontation and being told in no uncertain terms that I was in fact not one of the good guys. I wasn't responsible in terms of making any of the problematic decisions, but I realized that I was being responsible.

Although this participant had no real decision-making responsibility related to the business line under attack, they felt shocked at how everyone, including their own ethics, was being questioned:

> Everyone was questioning our ethics. I mean, these were very decent people: I was a decent person: but people were dying in the world because someone in the company made decisions that were wrong, and, in the end, I realized we were all responsible. Whether anyone intended to cause harm or not.
>
> I thought how do a decent group of people end up in this situation where decisions can lead to such negative outcomes? That has stayed with me, it certainly still stays with me to this day. It makes me think how you can have the best people individually and great leaders, but ultimately as a collective you can end up doing the wrong things. I think that's ultimately where I think the challenge is—how you can lose sight of the wood for the trees.

This same participant reflects that leaders and organizations can become so focussed on maximizing profits that they end up making decisions in a microcosm, not considering the broader perspective:

> If you don't engage with your wider stakeholder group and privilege their needs and perspectives, you're going to do harm. So I stopped and thought about what was right for

> me, and, in the end, I made the decision to leave. The money and position just didn't compute for me; it wasn't worth it. That was a key decision then and for me now.

As an IMC cohort participant, an issues manager reflects on the value of trying to stay aligned with one's own values in an organization. This participant has decades of experience working in fields which regularly require leaders to face and navigate crisis:

> It's interesting delving into this because these are things that we don't often take time to sort out or stop and think about. It's like connecting a lot of the dots for me. I'm thinking that I want to say corporations are like tortoises; people are, too. It leads to some stupid decisions that create a lot of problems for everyone, not just the organization, but everyone who is affected by what organizations do. It's almost like the focus becomes self-protection—leaders protecting themselves and their interests, and organizations either resting on their laurels or closing off thinking they are too big to fail.
>
> I've tried to avoid falling into that trap by forcing myself to be very purposeful in my work. I've developed policies and procedures and guidelines so when there is a crisis, it is at least clear who has responsibility. At least in a crucial period, the accountability to make decisions can't be pushed down. What I've seen is that decision makers, afraid of their own standing and legacy, will try to push the more complicated problems over to others to clean up messes. I only have so much I can influence and control, but in my role I can and have ensured that leaders are the ones who must take responsibility. In the process and policies I have responsibility to develop, maintain, and enforce, leaders are not allowed to push decision-making off—at least on paper.

The problem this participant identifies is that individuals and leaders often have a "limited perspective or understanding of what they are responsible for." They continue

exclaiming that “it’s not just the budget!” This participant highlights the need for leaders to learn and be held accountable to listen and to accept the breadth of responsibility they have. “It’s not the job of HR or Communications—they can’t be allowed to bury their heads in the sand.” Sharing how trying to be responsible can drain you, learning to pace yourself and know when to engage and step back, is key.

> This idea of being responsible. A lot of the tension comes in when people in power are not listening. And they don't do anything about the things that can really do harm. In those situations, sometimes I do as much as I can in terms of providing information and explaining my perspective. And then I must basically—you must choose at some points that you are either going to push through it and keep trying to persuade or you step back. And I've had to step back a lot of the time. What I hold on to is that those negative outcomes are also learning lessons for those people that wouldn't listen. If they are responsible enough to reflect. But it’s complicated and sometimes you have to make tough decisions about when to push and how far.

I conclude this section with the following reflection from a scholar who recently made the decision to change institutions. Concerns about how administrators were leading their institution resulted in them deciding to leave, which was at the time in their words, “traumatic.”

> I look back now and I think, okay, you were being true to yourself in your decision to quit; you were being true to yourself in terms of what priorities you would like to set for the remainder of your working life.

Personally I relate to the stories told by research participants about the lifestyle choices they have made in their lives in order to have the ability to adapt, be flexible, and at times even walk away from organizations and roles. I found myself vividly remembering one of my

European colleagues who was very accomplished and well respected within and outside of the organization we both worked for. They would often advocate to friends and family to "live like you can walk away anytime." To them, debt and pursuit of material wealth was in their lived experience the ethical and responsible downfall of individuals and organizations. This colleague had made tough choices, including leaving a role based on an issue on which they were unwilling to compromise on. Not coming from wealth themselves, they purposefully lived humbly and, upon their tragic and early passing, gave to causes they felt passionately about.

The following reflection from one of my research participants specifically triggered me to think back to my time working with my European colleague. During one of our conversations, this participant from the RGL cohort said

> There are still too many people, leaders, who believe that only the bottom-line matters. Why? Because they know the company's bottom line is their own bottom-line. Now they may talk a good game about CSR and the like but if personally you see your value, others, your family, your community sees your value as wrapped up solely with your bottom-line, the chance that you will privilege anything or anyone else is slight. Very unfortunately it seems that kind of thinking has . . . become more prevalent in the last couple of years. The danger is, I think, that leading responsibly is reduced to being responsible for the bottom-line. And it can't be; responsibility is so much more than that; so to be responsible you must care about more than the bottom-line and make decisions that may even hurt your bottom-line.

Shifting from the value of exploring one's own stories, developing definitions and an understanding of what are truly non-negotiables, I shine the light on how the relational nature of responsible leadership also emerges in stories shared.

**Engage With Others: Build a Support System and a Network**

The importance of engaging with others emerges in most stories shared and is visible in each of the insights presented. Bringing the importance of building a support system and creating a network of like-minded people to the fore however provides a deeper understanding of the role others play in a leader's journey. Most participants tell stories about the criticality of having individuals, colleagues, institutions, and resources to help them professionally and personally. Some participants talk about seeking the support of counsellors or psychologists, for example, to help them make meaning and unpack their experiences of facing the tensions associated with being at the point of impingement. Some participants refer to their partner or members of their family as their rock, guiding light, or supporter, commenting that "they help keep me on track." Others talk about having a go-to book or author that sustains them and provides motivation. Some participants note that engagement in the present study has encouraged them to reflect on and make meaning from their own stories. Regardless, the key message that emerges is "not to go at it alone." I share several stories below about the importance of being connected with like-minded people, building networks, and support systems.

This educator in the RGL program acknowledges the key role their partner plays in their ability to do what they feel is right. Specifically, the participant says, their partner challenges them and their decisions, and has difficult conversations about priorities. The participant notes how those conversations continue to be instrumental in their personal growth and development as well as to their ability to stay as true as possible to their values:

> It's interesting to think about how my wife has been so instrumental in helping me understand how my positionality as a white male affects every interaction I have—in my personal life and professionally. We had been married a while and she finally talked to

> me about her feelings about being a working woman, and the kinds of things that she experiences. Sometimes subtle little things, but some things I was shocked to hear about. When she started talking to me about this, I made immediate connection to the fact that we have daughters and that they may experience realities like these in the world as well. I became so aware of things I never had seen, things I had previously been oblivious to. I had no clue and was ignorant about the effect they had on people. I had to realize that as a white male I was having impact on people I loved and people I worked with. It helps having a partner who is a coach and there for me. She points out to me when I'm being less than truthful to myself. In some cases she challenges me when I'm not really in line with what I believe or who I am working toward being.

An IMC member has confronted many challenging situations where their ethics and those of their company have been called into question. They describe a moment earlier on in their career and marriage when they came home and told their spouse that if a decision they made on a key environmental, health, and safety matter was not endorsed that they would have to resign. Having reached that decision and being supported by their spouse in that moment become pivotal and liberating. With extensive real-world experience in issues management and environmental protection, the same participant recalls the importance of a former mentor who has left an indelible impression:

> I remember him saying to me, "You know there isn't a leader in this company that will win an argument against me on environmental regulation. Eventually, I will win." Hearing him say that, just in a conversation, it made me realize how committed he was to do the right thing. It wasn't about ego. It was that as the top environmental guy you get lots of pressure—financial, legal—a lot of pressure. But I thought then—right! When you

> are leading, there are things you can't be willing to lose, and you need to know what those things are. If a plant is out of compliance, it's not about saving money. You are the head environmental guy; you make the call. If the organization doesn't listen, then you have to rethink what you are doing there. Looking back, those words he said, I have used them, thought back to them when the chips have been down.

Another IMC member who now owns their own business, talks about how members of their family have helped shaped priorities related to how to engage in business and who to privilege. This story itself illustrated the value of story-telling in leadership:

> I learned from my father-in-law. He tells the story of when he and his partner were building their company and hoping it was going to be successful and they were really getting in that growth mode. He told me about all the challenges that come with running a business. He told me this story about one day being at his window and looking out at the parking lot. And, he saw all the cars of all the employees. He and his partner looked at each other and said, oh, gosh, how are we going to take care of all these people? I was amazed the first time he told the story. I mean, I thought he was in this technical industry with these technical engineers and the type of business wasn't what you would think would foster leaders who really care about the people-side as much. But he said when you are the owner, you must think about what's right. So that taught me how every decision you make, if it's not a good one, if it does harm, all those people are going to get hurt. You can't just think [about] yourself. All those people in the parking lot—every decision you make—they rely on you for their future and their livelihood.

Finally, a scholar living in Europe with a young family speaks at length about the value and importance of having partners in one's journey—whether that be family members or colleagues who share similar values:

> The way I talk about responsibility is this fundamental idea of recognizing you are embedded as a human being in a social, natural, ecological world. Part of that is also being embedded within systems. Being embedded means working within but also challenging systems. From that starting point, it is then about the choices you make and how you choose to interact responsibly. Being responsible is an ongoing process of questioning really.
>
> I suppose in an active sense leading responsibly it is about being thoughtful about how you are in relation to others, with others, and to what. On the personal front for myself and my family, it is important to break it down into the daily things that we might do, might use, different materials we could employ to get work done, even what sort of technologies that we employ. Personally, there are issues and implications of these choices, so it is key to be in relation and aligned with one another and toward who we want to be in this world, what footprint we want, and don't want, to leave.
>
> Professionally as well, there are constraints and pressures, expectations to support the system. But focussing on making change means being creative within settings and systems to find a way to be responsible. I have realized the importance of finding others who share the same sense of purpose. Sometimes, these partners come from places you wouldn't expect, and then together you can find ways to introduce change in ways that aren't threatening to the status quo. Once within the system consciousness, the change can be taken up and can grow.

> For me, I focus on carbon footprint and the challenge has been to introduce that within my institution; very risky. After all, the very leaders who hold my career and even my pay cheque in their hands see flying around the world as a perk, their privilege. I tried raising the issue of minimizing our carbon footprint as academics on my own and felt hostility back and realized I couldn't seed the idea. I ended up meeting quite by chance a fellow who is focussed on research related to the climate. So it has taken time and patience. But approaching the topic from a research perspective has ended up more palatable and less threatening. So working with others, finding ways to work toward our shared purpose to make change, to be responsible within the system, has been arduous, but it is being taken up, though cautiously still.

Finally, another scholar finds inspiration and motivation from an author whose work they were first introduced to whilst studying for their PhD. At pivotal moments, they are drawn back to this author's work in helping them make key decisions:

> I think of this fellow of Bengali descent, Bobby Banerjee. He got his PhD originally in mathematics, and he was a businessperson but, you know, in the last 20 years or so, he turned hardcore Marxist and he's a prolific publisher. His most famous publication is on CSR (corporate social responsibility). It's called "Corporate Social Responsibility: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly" and it is written in a very clear way. And I got more and more influenced by his work. He was saying to look at CSR from the perspective of those in the community, those who are receiving CSR. The more I read and reflected on what he was saying, I was drawn to this view of how dialogue is used sometimes as a way of co-opting and silencing descent. But I was naive at the time, and I had begun interviewing with this institution focussed on human rights, so I put his work aside.

> Looking back, I think that the me who was interviewing at the time and the me I became after a few years in the job was so different. Something didn't feel right to me being on the corporate side of social responsibility, being in meetings with these companies. You know nobody said, 'What we really want to do is just do lots of greenwashing.' But I could just see the way they were approaching things. They were just obsessed with numbers and indicators and toolkits and dashboards and I just thought this is not human rights—not really.
>
> So Banerjee's words came to mean something real to me and I understood in a real way his message. His work has influenced me ever since, keeping me committed to ensure dialogue is not used as a weapon.

With a deeper understanding of self and the importance of those with whom we are in relationship, stories are now shared about the importance of preparation in responsible leadership.

**Preparation is Key**

All the participants share stories which speak to the necessity of leaders being mindful and aware of the realities associated with making choices that do not support conventional norms and values. Acknowledging reality, however, is insufficient, and participants share stories of learning the importance of being prepared personally and professionally to adapt. Many of the other insights which emerge in the analysis of their stories speak to how they prepare—by building a support system, for example, continuously learning, engaging strategically, and knowing the non-negotiables. They speak of experiencing anxiety, fear, frustration, sadness, and even anger, but they reinforce over and over the need to be prepared—that is, to acknowledge the possibilities and be willing to adapt. None of the participants suggest that the challenges and

risks are insurmountable, or not worth the effort. Adapting, of course, means different things. For some it is to compromise and shift direction. For others it is to learn how and when to negotiate. Still others speak about learning to challenge and push back. All participants share how being responsible requires planning and preparation as well as being in a position to leave a job or place of employment if necessary.

Being prepared has four aspects: the need to engage with eyes open, openly and humbly; the importance of considering the impact of the context in which one leads (some participants refer to context as their organization, while others refer to the systemic realities of today's world of work); the effect of their own positionality on how they experience challenges; and, finally, the various types of risk they face when they do not adopt conventional approaches—professional risk, personal risk, and risk to others.

***Keep Your Eyes Wide Open***

One IMC cohort member describes the importance of "having your eyes open"; an educator in the RGL cohort with decades of experience working in international organizations says not to "go in blind." This same participant talks about distinguishing between "thinking about doing the right thing and actually pulling the trigger and having to deal with the fallout." All the participants tell stories of learning to take responsibility as learning to live with the consequences of their actions**.** Participants say that choosing to consider values not aligned with economic growth, productivity, and profit requires them to cultivate the capacity to engage in situations that are ambiguous, uncertain, and complex, and which can create conflict. Being prepared emotionally, mentally, and professionally requires cultivating the will and the skill to adapt and change. One participant from the IMC cohort with three decades of work experience in the United States referred to it as an "investment" you make to be the person you want to be, or

in their words, to be “the person you can live with.” This participant references former U.S. president Truman’s comment about the need for leaders to face the consequences of their decisions, that “the buck stops here,” further noting that someone who takes being responsible seriously doesn’t blame others and is willing to “own their decisions.”

In some form or another, participants each pointed out the importance of humility in leading responsibly. Some insisted how being responsible cannot be about seeking fame or fortune. Others shared how responsibility requires learning to work through ambiguity and not having control. During a discussion with a research participant, I said that, for me, being responsible in terms of my decisions has meant not only standing up for and explaining choices, but at times also apologizing and rethinking my choices. A participant from the RGL cohort contends that while trying to be responsible is an “awesome endeavour,” that success begins with the willingness to be present and listen, and not to make grand declarations or seek to be a hero.

The responsibilities that leaders have must be ever present, a state of mind. With whatever level of responsibility you have for people in your life and workplace, you must have their interests in mind. Whatever conversation you're in, talk less and listen more. That’s what you must do if you're really trying to understand others’ interests. You can’t make the best decisions when you are making them based on ego or self interest.

Building on this theme, this educator with extensive experience in international business as well as non-profits says that “engaging responsibly doesn’t mean you are a hero” and advises that “you can’t see [being a] responsible leader as a path for collecting accolades. You have to be okay with that.”

### *Consider Context Carefully*

Nine of the eleven participants speak specifically about the impact of today's socio-economic and political context as underpinning the risks associated with being responsible in their decision-making. A participant who teaches in the RGL explains how systemic factors so strongly influence discourse, that shifting direction seems almost impossible:

> I think the barrier to responsibility in today's world is a belief that you can't change anything anymore. That things are headed in a direction and there is nothing that can be done, that individuals can't make a difference. And I think the culture of selfishness, which started in the 1980s in the Reagan/Thatcher era, has really become very pronounced. And so there may be a feeling of impotence among many people, and selfishness—selfishness born of that era and the perspective that there is no alternative to the trajectory we are on, that there is no alternative to neoliberalism. The mean-spiritedness of neoliberal policies—they are absolutely disgraceful in human terms.

Not without hope though, this same participant asserts that this very sense of hopelessness offers the potential for some leaders to choose to raise concerns and challenge these systemic issues in their own way,

> So all the more reason, as far as I'm concerned, to stand up. Because I believe, as individuals and leaders with some small span of influence, we can make a difference. So individually. While wealth and profit are the name of the game, as individuals, each of us can at least choose to consider otherwise. It just means that we have to know what we are getting into, exposing ourselves to, and be prepared.

A scholar who worked in consulting before returning to the academy shared the view that companies and institutions in today's context are designed or "wired" to focus on what is

efficient, productive, and profit-generating. Even in the case of non-profits, economics are still central, with "the focus being on self-sufficiency." The challenge of being responsible in decision-making, this participant said, is tied to today's context in which human value and human life is determined economically:

> One of the favorite mottos in business is what gets measured gets managed, and they need to always measure and manage everything. Otherwise, they don't feel they're in control and they get anxious. Companies are trying to put issues and challenges like human rights into a box, put processes and controls and KPIs around it. But at the end of the day, you can't reduce responsibility and doing what is right into economics; it can't be measured by money.

This view resonates with my own lived experience working in issues and crisis management. I have been involved in decision-making related to topics that involve human health. As a result, I learned how organizations and governments assign a dollar value to human life. There are many factors associated with that calculation (Viscusi & Aldy, 2003) including, for example, the country in which people live. I understood the need for such metrics from a purely business perspective, but I struggled personally. I remember not wanting to make eye contact with others on the team and having conversations with myself—in my own head, trying to balance logic with emotion. Sharing their struggle with trying to be responsible as an issue leader in a large industrial organization, this participant discusses the impact of today's unyielding drive for growth and profit:

> It's exhausting to consider the needs of so many. But that's what responsibility means today. Your decisions can impact so many people; there is this snowball effect with globalization. It's no longer just your neighbours you impact when you make a decision,

> it is people across the country or even halfway around the world. Just look across the US to see the effect of no amount of profit and productivity ever being enough. These other countries where we send jobs and our garbage—are we really thinking about them, are we really making things better for them? Today it always comes down to profit.

Providing a specific example of feeling overwhelmed, a scholar with decades of international experience in academia says that the system (context) in which they recently worked was not itself responsible. They highlight that while individuals can "step up, step in and be willing to be responsible," the system in which they act matters:

> I was reflecting on something that happened when I was with my former employer and I thought it was interesting because I think for me it illustrates something about responsibility in terms of the system in which you act, or you try to enact your responsibility.
>
> What ended up happening was, the head of Human Resources used a complaint I had carefully crafted for a specific purpose to support a case he was building against the organization's leader. The point of my complaint was about a process; it wasn't directed solely to or about the leader. I was trying to be responsible to everyone involved in the system. I was respectful of the system and was striving to be responsible to the players. I was doing what I was supposed to. What I didn't realize was that the system and the actors in it weren't being necessarily responsible themselves. So, what if the system is irresponsible? What if the people you are supposed to trust disappoint you?
>
> What I took away from that experience was that it's not worth it to put your neck out because that system can't handle it. I'm not saying all systems are bad, but in that place it was dangerous. What happens also I learned is that others, also swimming around in that

> system, will disappoint you. The environment you work in matters. In this case it led to people learning not to take responsibility but rather try to survive by climbing on the backs of others.

***Be Mindful of Positionality***

I offer here a story shared by a member of the scholar cohort as emblematic of how participants recognize the importance of their own positionality in being responsible. Each of the four participants in the scholar cohort specifically speak about the impact and demands of attaining tenure as having negative impact on their ability to engage in their research and work responsibly.

> Something to think about for this idea of responsible leadership is who can do it? What kind of power do you have to have to enable you to engage in this type of work? Leaders in educational systems… should be our priorities as researchers. They need us as researchers to support practice, but academic institutions demand that we publish theoretical papers. It's a conflict. I've always privileged responsible research. I've tried to do so but, honestly, I haven't always. I am in a position now where I can truly make choices—[to do] not just what will help me get published, not just what the university wants. I am privileged to be in a place in my career I can really do that. I understand personally, however, how hard it is and that part of the journey is learning to navigate the system—a system that has its own priorities and expectations of you. No one really teaches you that or how to navigate that.
>
> Even now, if I want to move further, I know there will be compromises in projects. It's a process. I've learned to test boundaries and push them so, regardless, I will continue

doing that and helping young scholars and educators who struggle to stay true to their values while creating a space for themselves in the system.

For participants in the IMC cohort it is not tenure but the ability to secure some degree of financial stability and professional credibility that helps them positionally to enact their agency with less risk. Participants speak about making life choices such as carrying minimal levels of debt as helpful when facing pressures and stress associated with choosing to challenge normalized values. Participants contend that being responsible is something you must want to do and be willing to do. Being responsible in decision-making requires making choices but doing so in a manner that is well thought out, and mindful of realities such as the span of influence and control you may have at different times. It also entails being prepared to face many forms of risk which I discuss below. The key point I inferred from the stories is that while being responsible in decision-making is not contingent on, for example, attaining tenure, reaching that milestone can itself change the nature of the challenge and the consequences faced.

***Anticipate Risk***

I use the word anticipate intentionally because in speaking about risks faced, participants say that it is insufficient to simply recognize that being responsible in decisions they make can create real risk. They speak to the importance of anticipating risk as a reality and preparing to deal with the consequences of making choices which do not privilege conventional norms and values is an active undertaking. The realities discussed do not just include risk to self or person (anxiety, stress, isolation, financial) and or to one's profession or career (role, promotability, financial). Participant speak to how making responsible decisions can create risk for others (employees, family, friends, stakeholders, and supporters). Participants tell stories about navigating what they call difficult, dangerous, and even treacherous waters, and of how trying to

be responsible can create angst, discomfort, isolation, the feeling of being overwhelmed, and tension. In colloquial terms, I heard participants essentially say “know what you are getting into” when you choose to be responsible.

**Professional Risk.** Many forms of professional risk are discussed by participants. For scholars and academics, the primary issue revolves around isolation and the risk of not making tenure. One scholar’s story mirrors that of others in reflecting fear for young and mid-career scholars and reinforces the need for change at the institutional level:

> Universities need to consider valuing responsible research, this type of work—on the ground, helping communities’ kind of work. What if they equally valued this kind of research as much as what gets published in prestigious journals? In my case, the University does not, but my Dean does. My current Dean is very much a supporter of this work and when it comes down to tenure and promotion, she may write a letter in such a way that this work is recognized and valued. But Deans don’t stay in the same place. So that's a risk. What if your supportive Dean moves? The structure is actually working against the ability to be responsible to broader stakeholders.

Another scholar with international work experience in the field of human rights describes how choosing to focus on “providing voice to those who struggle being heard” has impacted access to resources:

> People don't want to put their neck on the line and speak out. They don't want to burn bridges and I understand that. That was part of my thinking for quite some time as well. But, you know, I've made my decision. A few years ago, I decided to be okay to burn bridges, because if I want to help make change, I’m going to have to burn some, but only when there is a good reason. That’s how I am going to be responsible.

This same participant explains how their decision to write an article critical of a large company which had initially provided them with access to sources and information about a major project has had significant long-term consequences:

> They anticipated a glowing article on their outreach, but I wrote an article on what I saw was the dark side of this whole dialogue and consultation process. I wanted to go back and do an update, but they have never replied. My decision to do what I felt was responsible has closed the door to getting access to other companies in the future as well.

For practitioners in the world of business, stories shared about risks faced most definitely include those of needing to leave (voluntarily or being fired) their organization. However, of perhaps even greater consequence to their professional lives is being ignored, overlooked, and marginalized. This following story of struggle about "being responsible" in a large manufacturing organization is shared by an experienced business professional who now teaches the RGL seminar and is working full time for an international not-for-profit organization:

> One of my first jobs of integrating human rights into corporate business was to go to a key committee that looked at individual projects prior to tender. To see whether there were any human rights issues. To see whether there were any financial, legal, social impacts. So, I went there, I was quite green, and I went to this committee. It was a very tough business that had the aim of integrating some human rights criteria into their checklist, at least to incorporate some thinking on the topic. So, I was met at the door by a deeply unpleasant European man who said to me, by way of introduction, "Hello. So, you've come to talk to us about human rights. You know my wife is interested in human rights. She works for Amnesty International. Maybe you should go and talk to her." So

> that was a distinctly unpromising beginning. I was angry but hadn't the power to really do anything.

The following participant is an IMC member and recalls working for an international company as a new graduate. After coming under new management, the company started going through a transition which led them to focus on short-term gain. "You could just tell, they really wanted to jump on some new-fangled thing and were abandoning their entrenched long-time customer base and product lines." In their 20's at the time, the participant was one of a few employees offered a position which was called "a great deal." At the time, some encouraged the participant to just take the offer. After reflecting about their own feelings about the work they would be doing and "who" the company was becoming, the participant realized that

> It was not a place I wanted to be, and I had lost confidence in the company, their focus on the things that mattered to me like the work environment, employees, and customers with whom we had relationships and to whom we were responsible—let alone long-term issues.

This participant made a very difficult decision to leave without anything to fall back on, professionally or financially. They expressed feeling fear of giving up an important role but recognized how "it wasn't right" for them. Upon further discussion of what "not feeling right" meant, they share concerns about being expected to do work that went against their personal "moral compass." They talked about having to do things in a way they wouldn't be proud of and wouldn't want their friends and family to know about. They felt unsure about whether the expectations of the company may have bordered on being unethical or against the law.

**Personal Risk.** Participants share a variety of experiences in which they describe feeling stressed, ill or finding themselves "unsure" about themselves, their perspectives, "feeling

paralyzed" or "unable to act." Some participants talk about concern about the perception of others, their reputation and fear for their future. This story from an educator in the RGL cohort highlights how personal and painful situations can be, and how one's career and health can be impacted,

> I thought I could really change things and I loved the work. Then there was a change of leadership. And everyone knew the person who was going to come in as CEO. He had a very particular reputation which was based on what I would say was command and control. Follow the discipline or hit the road. Old school CEO thinking. He wasn't about creativity or about learning from mistakes. It even extended to him persecuting people who didn't agree with him one hundred percent. If you weren't 'with him" you were out, or you were on your way out.
>
> Many people suffered; many people had different degrees of burnout. Many people were forced to leave the company. The atmosphere changed. And for me, I was in a situation where I was no longer asking people in this company, "how are you?" in the morning you know "Hey, how you are doing?" Because I would know the response and I'd heard the litany of woes. It went on for a number of years and it was always the same story.

This same participant's health began to suffer as did their anxiety about their own reputation and brand given the growing schism between their own values and that of their CEO.

> I ran up against this wall around 2015. And I thought, I knew under this regime, the topics I was passionate about, the change I was committed to make, well those were not going to be priorities. They were not even only the radar. With this leadership regime there was a consummate lack of interest in these issues. And then it was time to rethink

> my next steps. I wanted to do this work, I wanted to contribute but I wasn't going to make any further progress in this company that I had cared so much about, the people. So it was the time to think what mattered to me. So it was a financially precarious thing to do, but I left, and I've never looked back.

In a very different environment, this scholar also expresses their struggle related to how far to push one's own perspective, especially when it runs counter to the norm. Specifically they note their struggle with "how much of your identity you share in the space you are in." As a strong advocate for addressing climate change for example, they have felt pushback from those who are in positions of institutional power.

> How much do you want to show of yourself, and how much do you want to fight for in order to build something you believe in. You want to share your perspectives, but the fear is that you will be dismissed as radical figure or someone who is unreasonable. I think it is something to carefully approach and consider.

Another scholar, who focusses on the topic of responsibility in their teaching and in their research, highlights how being responsible in decision-making feels to them in today's globalized, technological and economized world of work,

> Too big, messy. It all feels so overwhelming. Yeah...there's so many variables. Doing things responsibly is hard work, it takes energy. It is messy and doesn't fit with what organizations really want to have happen. You have to know that's what you are up against when you climb on board.

Part of being responsible in terms of decision-making, notes another scholar, is learning how "it has a shadow side"—a tendency to be too responsible and "kind of wanting to save people and ending up being an enabler of bad behavior." They say that "it's not something you

can just turn off—it's hard work, but it is important work to ensure you are in a position to step in and step up when it is truly your time." This scholar describes the almost daily challenge however of balancing "being prepared to step up when needed, but also to step back and let others take responsibility—let them take responsibility for themselves." This perspective led me to reflect on my own relationship with responsibility. As I discuss earlier, I describe being responsible as a tattoo and one that feels indelible. As such, I too recognize the need to consider the risk highlighted by this scholar—being over responsible creates its own, significant set of challenges and issues.

**Risk to Others.** Several participants explained how being responsible in their decision-making can become more complex as others come to depend on you. Each story is different yet share similarities. One is how most participants did not recognize early on how being at the point of impingement, at the intersection of opposing norms and values was affecting others in their life. For example, working at an international not-for-profit organization, this research participant now a scholar and academic shares how their work stress had broader implications:

> I ended up ruining almost every social encounter with friends and family. I'd end up discussing my job and colleagues. I had been so hopeful to have an impact, to help make change. But everything that went on, all this stuff, and it was terrible. So, the way I got around it was—I mean, I took it out on people who really mattered to me and ultimately when I realized how bad it had become to be around me, I started hiding how unhappy and conflicted I felt. That wasn't good either, not for me, my health including my mental health. It also wasn't good for those who cared about me.

Another manifestation of risk to others according to participants is the possibility that one's actions, can result in harm being caused to stakeholders. This member of the IMC cohort recalls a circumstance managing a situation involving protesters:

> I had one objective—no one was to get hurt. I told my leader what I felt needed to be done and how. And it went all the way up. It was the right thing to give the protesters a place—the space to convene and express their perspective. It was costing us lots. Our trucks couldn't get in or out. I fought for what I felt was the right thing. The Board listened, they trusted me. I guess everyone did, but, well, it turned out terribly, just terribly. I still think about it. I was told things could turn violent, but the responsible thing was to respect the freedoms we hold dear in this country. Like the freedom to congregate and free speech. But with so many people, there was a lot of tension. It wasn't anyone's fault, not the protestors for sure. My boss said to not second guess myself, but the people, well, they got hurt. I have trouble with that, still.

This story led me to reflect on my own lived experience of working at sites of contestation. The participant and I had an in-depth discussion on the complexities of working in emotional and highly charged situations. One of the reflections shared by the participant resonates with me strongly:

> I just hate it when people say that "you can only play the deck you are handed." I know what they mean, and I know people say it to be kind or supportive. It is usually meant well. But it just isn't helpful. Not to me. Not when you find yourself thinking back and considering what you could have done better. When you have caused harm, not meaning to but because you had to fire someone or send them into a situation that could be difficult. People aren't cards and it isn't a game. People who glorify leadership aren't

taking it seriously. You need to get tested to be a driver; you can affect people's lives. It should be that way for leaders. It is a serious business.

I had not considered or reflected upon how leaders can risk not only themselves and their careers, but also their family, friends, colleagues, and even stakeholders. In hindsight, however, I have thought about how my own choices have had implications for and impact on others. In one instance, I had hired a professional who self identified as a black female to work in our community in the southern United States. They were the right person for the role and in an environment where there was a high need for diversity and inclusion in professional positions, hiring her was the perfect choice. They expressed concern up front, however, about racism and fear of being singled out for taking a role from someone (white, male) local. I listened and heard the concern but genuinely believed it would be a positive experience overall. The individual moved but one year later, they returned to the nearest metropolitan city and began commuting. While still loving the work and the collegial environment in the office, the context of living in the community was unsustainable. By way of example, as the only person of color living in a well-respected gated community at the time, they were harassed every night by security guards who questioned this individual (and only this individual) intensely before allowing entry. In hindsight, could I have listened better? Whose interests had I really been privileging in convincing them to come in the first place. After discussion with my research participants I recognize how, despite good intention, we can easily lose sight of, not even recognize, or perhaps not be willing to consider the downstream consequences of our decisions on others.

**Responsibility is a Strategic Endeavour**

Related to this insight, I identify three subtopics. These are developing new skills and competencies, reframing perspectives on time and timing and the need to shift to a longer-term

horizon. Embedded throughout this insight is the concept of responsible leadership being a journey, not a destination. This theme is central as it comes to ground decisions leaders make and how they think about choices they have. Responsibility as a strategic endeavour includes stories of learning to be deliberate, focussed, measured, patient, and finding ways to calibrate your expectations—of yourself, of your organization, and of others.

### *Skills and Competencies*

Related to competencies, participants share stories of learning how to make strategic choices and compromises, including what to take on and what to let go, when and where to do so, and how. For example, participants' stories include learning to become a better listener, developing negotiation skills and finding ways to develop patience. For example, participants speak to having to learn about how to reach out and build connection with a breadth of stakeholders with vastly different lived experiences and priorities. One participant from the educator cohort shared their learning that there is no "cookie cutter or one-size fits all approach" to being responsible because there are so many variables, moving parts, and choices. The same participant says that not only do circumstances and context shift, but that as a leader you must recognize that you and your stakeholders are also in motion; "to whom you are being responsible changes… and being responsible means different things to different people."

### *Time and Timing*

Time and timing have to do with concepts of resisting today's drive for acting quickly and privileging efficiency. The following story by a former business leader, now teaching the RGL seminar, provides a snapshot of a leader trying to be strategic related to a major project. They recall being in a role in which they were struggling to get a facility in Eastern Europe built.

Colleagues and leaders in other industries advised them to ignore regulators, push forward on the project, and figure things out at the end.

> There was a lot at stake. I remember the stress. I was worried that this would be viewed as a big failure and the larger corporation would lose interest in this development. They would get frustrated and cut loose the division I was responsible for and all my people would get fired. Conventional wisdom and the advice I got from every single one of my industry colleagues was to bypass the administrative black hole created by the government. Everyone said to just do the work and then go for approvals. That way companies could strong-arm the country holding jobs and taxes over their heads. But I knew I had to take a pause. I don't know what unnerved me more, the fear of everything failing or doing things in a way that was just wrong in my mind.

The participant ultimately chose to go to the national regulation body instead of following the advice of others. The risk was significant as the standard wait time for government approval was 12-18 months.

> One of the things that I've found over the years is that when I'm in difficult situations and I must make tough decisions, I need to just stop and step back. I literally tell myself and others that I need time to think. In this case I just couldn't take the approach my industry colleagues advocated. For me it just didn't feel right, so I set up a meeting with the Ministry responsible.

Knowing the risks, this participant told their company that they would not create an adversarial relationship with regulators—that such an approach ran counter to their own values and ethics. Ultimately, working with the government did result in the project being completed—albeit in just

over the timeline outlined by the company. The whole experience was immensely stressful, but upon reflection the participant did not regret the position they took.

Another participant from the IMC cohort lectures at business schools and at industry events. They reinforce the importance of being strategic not only in terms of how one engages responsibly, but in terms of timing.

> If you try to force through something at the wrong time, you may never get to bring it back up again. Ever. It's sort of like getting a bill through Congress in the US. If you try to ram it through at the wrong time, you may not, in the rest of your career, get to bring it up again. Well, business is the same way, and so is responsible decision-making. So, while you need to go for things that matter, you may need to lie in wait. You need to prepare; you need to be ready. And then, when you have the opening, then you push it through. But trying to push things when the timing is wrong, you know, then you're not using your own personal capital in the right way; it's your own fault. If you push at the wrong time, even if you're correct, if you push at the wrong time, you're not going to succeed.

A member of the RGL cohort offers a similar message about the importance of being purposive in championing a perspective, and being mindful of context, timing, and approach:

> I think that's something that we gain with the years. I think that you live through the phases of life and you choose to develop these skills or not. You choose to make conscious decisions about how to show your own personal leadership—who you are, what you value, who and what you privilege, and what you are willing to do or give up. Doing so helps you form much better relationships and acquaintances and understanding of what responsibility means to you. I wonder with responsibility that there is something

> in this idea of the long-term, the war, not the battle that's important. Sometimes you must step back from the battlefield to make strategic decisions about what you will do.

Concerned that "leadership is too often equated to making money and ignoring your values," this participant implores their audiences to "not be that kind of leader" and to demonstrate that being responsible in decision-making matters:

> The real tough part of responsible leadership is that you also need to demonstrate and show that there are consequences for those within leadership that are not standing up and leading by example. Making money is not enough. Remove those leaders from the business that don't care about how the money is made.

An educator in the RGL program vividly recalls a presentation by the ex-CEO of Unilever who focussed on the issue of time in a speech:

> I remember one of his speeches made a lot of sense to me. He told the audience in a private gathering that Unilever has been around for 150 years and that they aim to be around for another 150 years, and that, he said, explains why they care about sustainability and responsible leadership—it is about taking the long, long view and not the next quarter's profits. And I think that's exactly what it's all about. So it's not just an Anglo-Saxon profit maximization view. It's also a short term versus long term view. I think intuitively the message is that a mindset that drives for shareholder profit maximization above everything else is a short-term approach to business and does not take a long-term perspective on issues of sustainability, and therefore cannot have a responsible business perspective.

### *Long-Term Horizon*

At the end of our second interview, a member of the RGL cohort reflected on our conversations and the experience of thinking actively about responsible leadership. This excerpt captures the essence of the stories shared within this theme of privileging a longer time horizon:

> I think we all go through different phases of life and then, for some, the idea of self responsibility develops. Understanding who you are, what kind of relationships, what kind of impacts you have and want to have. It's about developing your own core set of values based on responsibility. I think that's something that we gain with the years. I think that you live through the phases of life and you choose to self-develop or not. You choose to make conscious decisions about how to show your own personal leadership—who you are, what you value, what you are willing to do or give up. Doing so helps you form much better relationships and acquaintances and understanding of what responsibility means to you.

Eight participants described how they have come to privilege a long-term focus in terms of both individual responsibility and organizational responsibility. Their stories specifically highlight examples about how today's intense focus on short term results erodes the possibility of responsible decision-making. Being responsible also emerges in stories as being a journey or a path that takes time to follow, not a destination that can be reached in the short term. Some speak of it as a process—not a goal or a tangible reward to be attained, but rather a way of being or of trying to be.

Participants reflect on how unpacking their experiences through story telling helps them develop insights and understanding as well as having influence on their decisions for the present and the future. An experienced IMC member, for example, identifies the connection they have

made between being responsible, the concept of justice, and long-term objectives that are often overlooked in today's drive to garner short-term results:

> You must get people's mindset to the longer-term to have discussions about being responsible whether as a person or a company. Being just or responsible is more of an outcome—what's the outcome for all the stakeholders? An outcome is a longer-term concept. It takes you into a different time horizon. Because, justice doesn't play out quickly.
>
> A responsible leader works on longer-term time horizons than the 90 days. Because it's completely transactional and its short term, and that's how you can work to ensure you don't break laws, but if you're short-term focussed, you don't do anything that doesn't make money in the quarter. So, I think it's the short-termism that is removing morality and ethics—responsibility—from the Company, [from] people who are generally good people. You know, it's a bad system.

For many participants, our first discussion led to stories being shared that were top of mind or stories that perhaps they had shared before. In later discussions, details came to the fore about stories shared already, and stories buried away or long forgotten. A participant from the IMC cohort shares a story about how a high-powered corporate consultant attempted to coerce them to provide information they were not prepared to divulge. The consultant's efforts began with flattery and steadily escalated to manipulation and then to making threats. In sharing this story, the participant recalled an earlier experience, and realized in hindsight that the previous experience may have paved the way for them being able to resist pressure and stand up to the consultant:

> Gosh, you know, I remember being in a discussion about who should get a job and there were several leaders in the room. We'd sort of landed on one person to get this job and they said, “No, we can't give them the job.” So I asked why. “Well, the person is a diabetic and this will stress them out too much,” they said. I said, “It's up to the person to decide that.” You know it's not your decision to decide. I mean that was not legal, what they were doing. But I appealed to them on the basis that it wasn't right. It wasn’t legal but the issue was it just wasn’t a responsible way to decide. Ultimately, they gave the job to somebody else. But I learned from that. That's my point. I speak up, but I learned from it, and said, ‘When I'm the guy running those kinds of discussions, we're not going to do that.’

In sharing a long and complex story of struggling with expectations of a new senior executive, a participant from the RGL cohort recognized how their own growth, convictions, and confidence developed through a difficult period and, in fact, continues to influence their leadership. The participant recalls the stress and discomfort of being asked (essentially told) to support and implement decisions they saw as irresponsible at best, damaging at worst, and counter to their personal values. Having developed a very successful, high performing team in the health care industry, this participant said that what started as a request to save money on coffee grew into successive requests that were not only short-sighted but possibly harmful to patients:

> Looking back, I can live with the fact that I gave in to the first cost-cutting measure. In all honesty, it was ridiculous. He was the new leader, and I pushed back respectfully. I was leading a $150MM business and I said to him, ‘You are telling me I can’t buy my people a cup of coffee?’ Anyway I made the change and while it hurt morale, it made little

> impact on the bottom line. I did, however, accept that it was a signal to employees about the need to reduce spending. But even then, I just had this feeling about this person's style and approach. I had this feeling he wasn't going to stop there, and I was uncomfortable how he treated and spoke about employees but also his perspectives on our role and obligations in our industry.
>
> The second request, actually a demand, was unacceptable. He outright told me to play ball and go against, do a turn about, related to commitments I had made. His request went against our corporate values and was not something I was willing to do, and so I told him straight out that I would honor the commitment I made. It was essentially me saying I couldn't continue in my role if he pushed on that.
>
> I don't know, everybody is different. I couldn't possibly say or guess how many people look around at their personal circumstances and think that those circumstances are more important than the principles they once held or should currently be holding. But for me, I had hoped things were changing and he was recognizing the importance of individual and organizational credibility in the industry, but the third expectation was completely unacceptable. It was an impasse—he told me 'they' wanted me to change the service level agreements related to clinical trials.

While unable to share further details, that request was the final straw for the participant as human health would be put at risk:

> I thought to myself, oh, my god. We've got a small-thinking idiot here who doesn't understand anything about leadership and motivation and earning the trust and support of your team. Sorry. It also occurred to me that the situation was going to get worse—that this was just the tip of the iceberg and that we were going to have more problems—and

> problems that this leader either didn't understand or [didn't] care about. But I did, and I made my perspectives known and helped others, and myself, with an exit plan.

The participant recognized the company and the new leader were going to "sink the ship." They said that if the leader had been even somewhat receptive and open to listen and take feedback, the situation could have been very different. That not being the case, "they were out of business in less than three years because all of the customers had walked away." In reflecting on their memories and their choice to leave at the time, this participant says:

> In one way, it felt good, because I stood up for the right thing. I believed that I was doing the right thing for the company as well as for the other stakeholders. Short-sighted financial approaches are dangerous. I tried to be a good leader by standing up and not being willing to do things. I was helping my people decide what was right for them and, essentially, I put myself out of a job. But I felt that this was the right thing to do and I knew that I would find another job.
>
> But it's not that it was all clear from day one. It took time to understand what was happening and where things were going. I was intuitive enough to recognize an underlying issue and I didn't ignore it. I'm pleased looking back that I listened to that voice in my ear. I learned so much about myself, about what responsibility really means to me, and what it takes to work through all the situations and scenarios that you deal with.
>
> Ultimately now, I've been in industry for more than 25 years and I've seen how people must defend themselves against being railroaded by corporations. It may be the last option, but you must ultimately be able to walk in a situation that violates what's acceptable to you.

Shifting now to an educator from the RGL cohort who speaks to how, being at the tail end of their professional life, they feel freer and emboldened to make decisions that align with their priorities. That said, they reflect on a career that has required difficult decisions and the ability to survive in environments that were not psychologically safe or healthy,

> It's become about being in the right culture for me, with priorities and values that I can align to. My experience has taught me it's about making sure people feel like they belong. It's about building a community. Making a difference to a community, not just for yourself or those you work with. I learned the hard way in some of my earlier jobs, that otherwise it is not worth it. At least for me. You know, leaving a company, especially a prestigious one, has never been easy. It's change, and it's challenging because there's still that sense of pressure to stay because of the fear of being seen as a failure. For me, it meant something to have roles that would be respected in society—maybe seen as having some prestige. Ultimately though there were times when I realized that the values of the company and my trajectory weren't the same. There were several examples of simply unethical, illegal actions, and then there were those that were subtler, but they were still irresponsible in my mind.

Another educator from the RGL cohort recalls working for a corporate entity that was unabashedly focussed on profit. They reflect now on how that experience, while difficult, ultimately led them to taking a different path professionally.

> Everything was for the shareholder. And, the partners were one and the same—they were also the shareholders. So, ultimately, profit maximization and value maximization were the priority. I think wider stakeholder groups were narrowly acknowledged as including employees and specifically those who wanted to be prospective partners. The partners

> weren't happy unless they were making money. So no one could be happy unless there were stellar profits.
>
> It was a badge of honor to not go home, to drive yourself to the brink. At that time, in that context, there was nothing about caring for one's health or balance. Teamwork was talked about but, in the end, it was about the money you brought in. And I'd argue in businesses like consulting and finance . . . much of the same culture remains today.
>
> Anyhow, when I was there, there was nothing about having a broader perspective like concern for the environment. At best there were pet projects of partners that wanted to sponsor polo or whatever it happened to be. We were responsible for one thing, and that was profit.
>
> It became obvious to me there that I wasn't doing the right thing for myself, not the right fit, not the right culture or environment. I had thankfully learned from my previous experiences and, as a result, I started to ask myself, "Are these my people?" And when I felt and could accept that the answer was no—that their priorities were different—I didn't feel right. I felt I was more and more becoming an imposter within that culture compared to some of the other guys. It's not that I wasn't willing to earn my stripes but felt that I couldn't see myself doing what it would take. In fact, based on some of my past experiences, I wasn't willing to be the person and make decisions the way they did. I did it for three years and I learned a lot, but it was so clear it was time to move on.

This same participant recommends to their students that if 'being responsible' is truly a priority, then they must carefully consider the organizational culture and track record of organizations they may choose to work in. Reading words and declarations in annual reports is insufficient.

> There are still these high-pressure environments where the culture is very much about, you're either in or you're out. You know, you're in it for the whole, you know you're in it to get to the top, regardless of what you must do. Because that's the only carrot that they have for you. It's money and promotion. But if other things matter to you, then it's not responsible to yourself to join or to stay.

Another member of the IMC cohort who has both been a leader in organizations and led their own company said passionately:

> When you are going to lead, you have responsibility for other people. Leaders must understand that. You must think about your decisions and not just in terms of the short-term. You have to think down the road. You can't do it in isolation, and you can't just operate opportunistically. Just look around, all the time, everywhere we see communities, environments, and individuals who these leaders in companies have affected. I know that a lot of times the reason for this is that companies focus on maximizing profits and on short-term metrics. I don't know how that changes but one thing each person, each leader, can strive to do is to accept there will be financial goals, but, in real ways, ensure they aren't your only goals.

A tenured professor and experienced academician said that even recently they have struggled with being responsible in a classroom situation. Responsibility is a concept they say requires constant focus and is a challenge regardless of how much you have already done:

> I was co-teaching with a colleague and there was a very difficult exchange between one student and another. The one student made a comment and it was fine—about what they thought. This other student, though, responded with something like, "You're stupid." And it was interesting because my impulse was to call it, but my colleague got in first, and

> kind of ignored it and just moved on. So my colleague was obviously upset by it as well. But her impulse was to just move on. I have been thinking about this situation—I just can't let it go.
>
> I keep thinking why? Maybe because despite my experience I am new in this faculty? I'm the new person and I'm still learning how this place works? Regardless, I should have stepped up and I should have called it. I should have said, you know, "Hold on a second. Can we just back up? Could we just re examine that exchange and together question you know . . . is this really what we want?
>
> I think what stopped me in that moment, in retrospect, was that I didn't feel comfortable. The worst discomfort for me, though, thinking about it over and over, is seeing the expression on the student's face. The student who was called stupid. I saw what it did to her— she became silent. We can't replay time and I am thinking that I have learned about being responsible in the moment, even when you aren't sure what to do. You must course-correct in the moment because once the ship has sailed it may be too late. Like now I wish I could go back, replay time, and act in the moment.

Having lost some the "fire in their belly" over time, this scholar said they have learned that emotions and passion ebb and flow. What remains key is ensuring that their choices and decisions moving forward are still guided by their basic principles:

> Speaking personally, as time goes on, I sort of realize that I'm never going to be able to resolve everything in the world, all these problems. So I have shifted focus on what can I realistically do. I mean, I could take the advocacy role of an activist. I see people like that all around who become self-taught lawyers and learn how to help that way. I guess I could become active on social media and raise attention about certain conflicts. I see

> people doing that. But I think for me that would just really be emotionally draining and so physically taxing. And I just know that is not my space and there are a lot of good people doing it. I'm not the sort to be in the front line of a march or throw stones at a company or anything, because I realize how nuanced these situations are even within communities. Communities are divided and I don't want to be, and I don't think I really have the legitimacy and right to be speaking on behalf of a community or trying to intervene in the community that's in a country that's not mine in a region that's not mine. I also don't have any hope with companies. There's no room for dialogue with a company that has decided to do what they want. So I'm trying to publish whatever I can in this space and make some inroads there. And, I am just seeking a way to do it with doing least harm. My place is in academia. Trying to push back.

**Continuously Learning and Growing Resilience**

Within this insight, learning from failure, going back to school and maintaining an optimistic mindset and momentum are discussed as subtopics. I begin sharing stories related to this theme with a reflection from a participant, a scholar, who speaks to how their journey is now taking them down the path of looking inward to develop and grow as a professional who wants to be responsible, someone who can mentor and encourage others:

> If my work is going to be this responsible scholarship, then how am I going to improve me, the way I interact? So how do I develop myself to be that kind of person? I must take responsibility for my own development, you know, and so part of it might be trying to figure out how to develop something that helps me but also others who want to do this kind of work. How can I be more mindful or proactive about ensuring everybody's roles

> and responsibilities are in line as we move forward on these things? I guess that's the big thing. I mean just hearing myself say it is exciting.

From the IMC cohort, another participant looks with excitement to the future. Recognizing the challenges, they embrace the learning that has come along with experience and looks forward to translating insights for the journey to-date to what is yet to come:

> I am much more driven with age. I am much more driven by my own personal moral compass, my own north star, than I was 30 years ago. I was aware of my moral compass, to some extent, back then, but I was still in too much of a sponge mode. I was absorbing it all, you know. I was collecting the things that were going to refine my north star. The organization you are in, its nature, the experiences you have had, your tenure in the organization, all these things matter. You've got to trust your gut, but your gut must be informed by something. That's experience and learning and knowing that you will continually learn.

Participants share many stories of recognizing the need to actively learn from challenges and failures and to reflect and learn from one's own experiences as well as those of others. Doing so, says one participant, involves "the hard work of critically considering my own actions and approaches." Participants speak to the value of formal and intentional learning but also learning from unexpected, informal situations. One participant refers to learning from "weathering storms" while another refers to trying to be responsible as learning to ride a bicycle—specifically the need to get back up when you have fallen off, and to realize that you can't control all the variables you will face. An interesting point of reflection under this topic is how approximately half of the participants (beyond the scholar cohort) chose to go back to school as part of their

journey. Hence, the two dimensions I highlight associated with this insight are learning from failure and going back to school.

### *Learning From Failure*

The importance of not only learning from failure but accepting it as an inevitable part of development and growth emerges as a key point. A tenured scholar with international experience says that "you have to learn from other people's mistakes as well as your own." They note the importance of building relationships and creating a psychologically safe environment with others as key to sharing experience and communicating about success and failure. "If you are all wrapped up worrying about looking like you have it all together, you will never be able to be vulnerable, to put others' needs in front of your own."

An IMC member with decades-long experience managing crisis in multiple sectors highlights the value of sharing one's journey with others:

> Sometimes you feel alone; it seems so much easier to just do things the way everyone else is . . . if it saves money or maximizes profits it's good, right? So you suffer through and then you realize there are others thinking about what is right, not just what helps you hit the numbers. It really feels good to share and to learn. Sharing successes and things that don't go well helps you, but it can also help someone else.

Another IMC member started their career in the field of health care, where they note every day brings new, unexpected, and challenging situations. For them, navigating responsibility is about being open to learn from unexpected events.

> Accidents are never planned. Patients run away, so many things you can't prepare for. Situations everyday. Most people wouldn't want that kind of crisis every day. You know over the years, with each of my positions that I held, I tried to focus on learning from all

> these different experiences, from different situations. Some things came off well, some not. I had to learn from how I responded and learned through trial and error basically. Some things didn't come off at all, and I had to learn from those too. So many things happened but having the attitude of learning from trying to do the best thing possible for your patients is the key. The problem starts when you don't have them at the forefront of your mind, your work, or your efforts. I know times I've been tired or had other challenges in my life and when I look back . . . I guess it ends up always those times that I am disappointed with myself. It's, well, most often because for whatever reason I wasn't present in the moment. Those experiences and learnings have had a lifetime impact.

An IMC member and businesswoman reflects about the importance of acceptance—recognizing that sometimes, despite all your efforts, someone may not feel you are or were responsible. They share a story of trying to be responsible during a merger acquisition and striving to ensure everyone's needs were met.

> I was working for this company, for a very brilliant man. And I had just been hired about three years before. I really revered the gentleman and I dove right in. I was quickly promoted to management based on my success in sales. The owner sadly got cancer and died very quickly, and he died with no provision for transitioning the company. Once he died, the company went up for sale. It was like a revolving door—companies coming in, saying they wanted to buy the company but, really, they pretty much wanted to buy the assets. What that meant was that they would let everybody go.
>
> I found myself being entertained by different companies because in sales I had the majority of key relationships with clients. It grew very awkward. I knew how terrific this

company was and I decided to do everything I could to stop it from being pulled apart. Reconnecting with a colleague at another company, we decided to basically invest ourselves. By doing this, we merged, and we figured out how to take everybody, the whole operation. All the people would be employed. It was such a great story.

But in the end, I couldn't make it right for everyone. One individual from the original company felt left out because in the new model we just couldn't find an equivalent role. He made the decision to leave. I was devastated. I tried to do everything, to save people's jobs and keep the company and the team intact. I was young; it was a real eye opener. It was hard. I felt I failed. It took a lot of time to figure it out— that with all the decisions you make, that you will never be able to make it right for everyone. It didn't turn out perfectly, but I look back and know I did all I could. The reality is that sometimes, some people won't see that or will believe that if you had been more responsible you could have affected a different outcome.

Finally, for me as a participant researcher, being responsible was for many years about being someone who does the right thing, tries to do right by others. Over time I feel that my perspective has shifted, and I reflect on one specific situation which was a pivot point:

I had done my job but had failed in accomplishing what I thought was responsible. I realized there was not going to be a win-win, no compromise everyone could at least live with. I was unsettled. I couldn't find a way through. What was eye opening was how everyone around me was saying good things. They were recognizing me for how hard I had tried. But it wasn't about them, I realized that then. It was about me, inside, how I felt about what I had been able to do. It was really a difficult time. Being responsible is not something others can decide.

### *Going Back To School*

An unexpected finding is that more than half the participants in the RGL and IMC cohorts have as mature adults chosen to return to school and pursue graduate education (Masters and PhDs in subjects such as Education, Leadership, and Social Responsibility). In fact, two of the four participants in the IMC cohort, two teaching the RGL, and I have made this very choice. Investment in further formal education is in each case discussed as purposeful—to inform past experiences, develop future direction, and explore alternative approaches to messy human problems we have experienced. This participant from the RGL notes:

> I had been working for about 10 years. I'd seen several things that had disturbed me close up. But I also saw that, you know, these things kill companies and it doesn't take a lot. It doesn't take, you know, lots of people to do stupid things. It takes one or two people to do something very stupid and take down the entire edifice and the entire company . . . to taint everyone.
>
> So I thought that was quite something. And going back to school was valuable. We looked at all sorts of ethical dimensions, CSR, and cross-cultural ethical dimensions. The Chinese perspective on ethics, the Japanese perspective, all these perspectives on topics such as ethics. Very interesting to see how people come up from very different perspectives, have very different philosophical underpinnings for what they consider as ethical and responsible. Going back for my master's was one of my best decisions and opened opportunities to engage in the world of work in a manner that I can be proud of.

A participant from the IMC cohort explains why their approach to being responsible in the workplace is different from those of others in their organization:

> While I'm responsible for one process in an emergency, I lead people whose lives will be affected. I'm responsible to government agencies and jurisdictions, but there is a bigger picture that I feel responsibility for. Maybe because of my upbringing, my experiences, having done a master's in leadership, I think about things a little bit differently than some other people do.

One IMC member completed a master's in leadership with a focus on ethics, while another has completed their PhD. In both cases the participants said that they sought to critically explore and understand their lived experience by re-engaging academically. They both also express the hope that with the combination of both practical and academic lenses they can better drive change, mentor, and coach. In my case, I shared the following in my master's thesis:

> Upon researching and reflecting on my background, I now understand that I have traditionally approached the world and my professional work from a predominantly neoliberal mindset and have been a believer in the power of meritocracy. My academic learning and work have opened my mind and understanding, however, and I find myself recognizing that the very concerns that I wish to research are fed and reinforced by the very mindset I have aligned with. (Blanchard, 2016. p. 5).

***Mindset and Momentum***

Participants highlight the importance of staying optimistic despite challenges and pressures. They also speak to learning to develop and strengthen resilience. More specifically, they talk about learning to take time to ensure their own mental and physical well-being. At times they link back to the role of their support network in helping them stay focussed. They reinforce that despite the natural skepticism that stems from living and working in today's neoliberal context, that staying hopeful and committed to work toward change is essential. These

stories often also tie back to learning about the importance of continuous learning, challenging yourself to remain self-aware while reflecting on context and the needs of others. Participants describe their experience as one of being deliberate about their attitude. They reinforce the importance of staying optimistic, and reframing what success means personally.

What emerges are stories about the importance of one's attitude, or how one approaches the concept of being responsible in decision-making. In terms of attitude, participants highlight the importance of optimism, patience, and temperance. One educator describes the importance of being mindful about responsibility—whether as a leader in business, in academia, or as a teacher. They say being responsible starts with being deliberate.

> My learning which I share with my students is the importance of looking for what is right and wrong, what is just, and discerning for whom it is right or wrong—taking time to think through what you are saying and hearing and how that resonates with your definition of responsibility. Be willing to question approaches or decisions—consider who or what it helps and hurts. Who wins and who loses? Follow that process and be mindful. Take the time, learn to embed such thinking in your practice. It takes a lot of energy, but I feel in the end it's better than following conventional thinking and ending up regretting or wishing you had done something differently.

During my interview with this educator I shared a story about one of my leaders who was often heard saying, "Leadership is not a popularity contest. If you are popular, you aren't doing your job in a way that is responsible." My leader pointed out that being deliberate and mindful about decisions requires considering many perspectives. Doing so not only takes time and perseverance but can make others uncomfortable—especially those others who automatically think you will support their point of view because of their position or power. Although I only worked for this

individual for two years, their willingness and encouragement to question the status quo remains with me. As a leader responsible for billions of dollars of assets, this leader challenged decisions from more senior executives. For example, if decisions around cost cutting did not take into consideration the multitude of stakeholders associated with the operations, they would stand up, ask questions, and challenge the thinking behind choices made. What stays with me is not only that they pushed back, but that they did it respectfully—with conviction, but in a calm, composed way which looked at the big picture, and extended beyond just short-term benefits.

Using different language but highlighting the importance of mindset and attitude, another IMC practitioner who manages issues for a major utility company describes learning about the importance of holding oneself lightly or gently in order to take on the challenge of leading responsibly:

> Being responsible isn't easy or clear, it's not without risk and you don't usually make most people happy. In my role I have to balance what my company says it wants, what my leaders tell me they want, what regulators hold us accountable to deliver, and what our customers expect from us. To be responsible in this environment requires coming up with solutions that can arguably cost me and my people jobs, get my company in hot water, or impact everyone in communities around the state. I have to remind myself and the people who work for me and those we work with to step back sometimes and hold ourselves gently. Otherwise it can feel all too much. So, staying positive is key. Knowing that things can go wrong but having faith that together we can find a reasonable path forward is key. The other option, to be afraid and just do what you are told—that's not an option. At least for me.

The following perspective from a scholar relates to approaching responsibility as developing part of one's identity.

> I see embracing responsibility as a way of being that takes energy and requires a certain mindset. Being responsible is not something I feel as a burden or something I should be recognized for. It's part of my identity. If we think about responsibility as a double-edged coin, on one hand you should be responsible and step into these spaces—spaces where you can help outcomes be fairer. At the same time, when you step in, you can't always see what's going to happen. You know, like you can't control it. So, you must be willing, I think, to step in this space knowing you will just have to see what happens. And then, you know, if you're not going to die, you know, to be able to hold yourself lightly enough so that you can learn and move on.

While many of the participants share stories about the possibility and hope for responsible leadership and their commitment to work within systems and organizations, one participant clearly questions the very possibility of having responsible, accountable organizations and leaders in today's context. This critical and thought-provoking reflection from a scholar draws together concerns discussed in this work.—concerns about today's neoliberal context which were explicitly raised by several participants, as well as the challenge of systems and organizations that themselves do not operate in a manner that supports responsible leadership:

> There is so much aspirational talk. The main message is that it's good when companies and leaders engage in aspirational talk. In fact, it's so good that even though they contradict themselves and don't do what they promise, it's okay. Why? Because the most important thing has become just telling good stories, making grandiose plans, and sharing

> with the world your big ambitions. Why, because we have come to believe that talking translated to progress toward your goals.
>
> Along with all this talk comes the thinking that we should not castigate people or organizations for not living up to their promises. This is hypocrisy. It is simply the epitome of not thinking critically, of not looking at the issue of power from a critical perspective. Those who have the privilege of aspirational talk have never been silenced, marginalized, or oppressed. They have never spent time in the global south or in rural communities. They experience the upside of such aspirational talk but never face the real-world consequence of when the talk leads nowhere.
>
> It's hypocrisy. It seems normalized, the hypocrisy. We just allow people to say they believe in doing what is right, and that they are committed to do something about it. And then when they don't it's not an issue, no one is help accountable. I've noticed in my adult life, especially in professional life, that it seems the norm to say something one day that you believe, and then the next day, not.

A participant from the RGL cohort shares similar concerns about the possibility of change given the dominance of today's prevailing "Anglo-Saxon shareholder profit maximization view coupled with a short term versus long term mindset." While raising the concern that given today's dominant discourse "we can not have a responsible business perspective," they also speak to how there remains possibility for change in spaces where there is still difference of opinion. For example, they look to an economically-charged issue like taxation. They assert that "executives, CEOs, and senior leaders can have different perspectives on how to conduct business and what responsibility looks like."

> There is a whole movement on paying what is deemed to be a fair tax, or a right or responsible tax. It's not a black and white issue, it is a continuum. If you look at most US or American companies, they can be seen as being at one far extreme of that continuum. It has almost become hard coded in the American context, a hard-coded position where minimizing your tax liability is seen as an obligation towards shareholders and therefore the less the less tax you pay the better.
>
> As an approach to business, it is also possible, however, to pay your fair share of tax. Of course, this is very subjective in every jurisdiction. It's complicated around where you do business, what business, and where your headquarters is. But if you look at the UK, a lot of US companies are headquartered in the United Kingdom. For example, Amazon, Starbucks, Google pay little or no tax in the United Kingdom, despite making billions of dollars worth of income. Now that's I think where the responsibility element comes in. It is about one's philosophical underpinning of how you do business. If your philosophy is that the only stakeholder that matters in the end is the shareholder, you end up on that one end of the continuum. These companies will argue and say, well, we're paying employment tax and goods and services and sales tax on the products, so they say, "We are contributing some tax revenue." But, you know, one can argue that goods and sales tax is paid by the consumer, for example. Other countries vary in terms of how they treat some of these issues. So the point is that there are alternatives.

While also questioning the state of today's context and the possibility for responsible leadership given "the mean-spiritedness of neoliberal policies, <which> are absolutely disgraceful in human terms," this educator in the RGL program remains hopeful as they look to the next generation and to future leaders being able to make further head way:

> Let me tell you the story of a family member. This young person has grown up without a father and, in recent years, I sort of stepped in a little bit. And this young person has seemed to like the work that I'm doing now and decided to pursue graduate education in human rights. When they told me what they wanted to do, I challenged them quite hard on this. I asked why? I said you will hear and see some of the most awful things, and you will never be rich. If you choose this path, you are choosing a very difficult path. It's going to be tough, very tough, you know. You must know what being responsible means to you, and what it means in terms of your career choices, your choices in life, and you must know there will be consequences of your actions. I said, have you thought about the negatives, as well as the many positive sides of being true to yourself? I challenged them without in any way trying to disillusion them. And you know, they wrote me the most wonderful articulate email. And by way of written response pointed out all the reasons why they wanted to do good and I was bowled over by it. And I, I just told them I'm proud of them and to go for it, but not blindly.

A scholar says trying to be responsible felt like being in a battle working with Anglo-American companies who adopt "cookie-cutter perspectives recommended by consultants to drive progress even though what they propose as best practices often do not align to what stakeholders want." They say the impact of engaging in this environment is formidable.

> When you feel deeply about this or if your job is to hold up the mirror and be the voice of stakeholders, it creates immense tension. I've found myself with businesses and governments who work under the banner of finding win-win solutions. So you scramble around looking for the win-win as if it's progress for everyone. So being responsible is to

> put forward the perspectives of those who are often silenced, those who don't affect your immediate bottom line. But it's formidable, it's like running up hills.
>
> Don't get me wrong, it can be so motivating and exciting, and you cling to the hope that you can make some change, influence some decisions. But when decisions are ultimately made based on the mindset that 'this is as good as it gets' or 'this is the lesser of all evils,' you are left trying to make sense of it all. I keep asking am I even having any impact or influence?

An IMC member says that when advocating for responsible decision-making in an organization, "a lot of the tension comes in when people in power are not listening. And they don't do anything about things." In those situations, this participant has learned how to navigate the frustrations without giving up.

> Sometimes I do as much as I can in terms of providing information and explaining my perspective. And then, basically, I have to choose. At some point you are either going to push through it and keep trying to persuade, or you step back. It is difficult, even painful. I've had to step back a lot of the time. What I hold on to is that those negative outcomes are also learning lessons for those people that wouldn't listen. If they are responsible enough to reflect. But it's complicated. Sometimes you must make tough decisions about when to push and how far if you hope to maintain the energy to work toward a responsible outcome next time.

A participant from the RGL cohort speaks about the need for individuals to shift perspective about what success is and how it is you "feel rewarded":

> A lot of times people point outside themselves for not being responsible. They say engaging others, listening to others, thinking about stakeholders is a problem because of

> expectations other people are setting. Like ‘this person wants me to get it done first, that person wants me to get it done faster, or this group wants me to get it done ahead of everyone else.’ But very often, the problem is personal.
>
> They have a problem in terms of control and task accomplishment, and they don't want to involve other people because it takes longer, and they don't want to have to change the way they're thinking. They know how they are being rewarded so even though you find that the input others’ have will improve your own decisions and improve on your own perspectives, you face a loss of control. That is a problem, because then success is limited to delivering against only metrics that are external, and imposed, not about values or about what you think is right.

I want to amplify here the idea of accepting the need to move forward even after being disappointed. Another scholar, for example, shares a story of how others in an organization misused information she developed to help address a failure in the hiring process: “You must know that other people will disappoint you within the system.” After reaching out in frustration to a colleague and then-friend in Human Resources to complain about how their material was misused, they recall:

> It was maybe a month to six weeks after this all happened, and I said to her, you know, ‘it just feels like nobody cares.’ And she looked at me, and I counted her as a friend and she looked at me and she said, ‘Who is it that you think should care?’ For a start, you know, I said . . . HR! You know, and she just looked at me. And after that I couldn't even have lunch with her because it was like, oh, my gosh, we are coming at this from completely different perspectives. Our view on being responsible and being ethical in practices, and how you see yourself in the complexity was, you know, completely different.

## Conclusion

While these last pages of stories have been dense, they represent but a fraction of the thousand or so pages of stories shared by participants in the present study. I have endeavoured to frame the insights and share the stories in the most authentic, meaningful, and clear way possible. In Chapter Six I address the research inquiry and questions by considering the insights, the literature reviewed, and the theories discussed. I conclude this chapter with a heartfelt thanks to participants.

## Chapter Six: What We Have Learned

I began this journey of discovery with an overwhelming question at the forefront of my mind: Is responsible leadership possible? Making it the title of my dissertation, my research itself explores the question of how leaders can come to be more responsible in their decision-making. Over the last few years I have come to recognize how these two different questions are interconnected in that they both speak to my belief that learning to make more responsible decisions is possible. Having unpacked and unravelled the concept of responsibility in leadership, responsible leadership as a theoretical framework, and the possibility for real change, I am ever more passionate about the topic. I am also now intimately aware of the complexity and challenge associated with it. Recognizing that sustainable and broad-based change in how leaders make decisions requires focus at the micro (individual), macro (societal), and meso (organizational) level, I acknowledge that while this work is more narrowly focussed on leaders as individuals, the insights which emerge also serve to inform those working to support change at the organizational and societal level.

I begin this chapter with an overview of the study, a review of key findings from the literature and theory, and a summary of the insights that emerged from the analysis of the research participants' stories. I then focus on addressing the research question and sub-questions and on demonstrating how the insights address gaps in the literature. In the conclusion to this chapter, I reflect on how the findings and insights inform the title of this dissertation. In Chapter Seven, I offer final remarks, point out what might have been done differently and identify opportunities for future research and practice.

**Review of the Study**

This narrative inquiry focusses on the exploration of a storied phenomenon: the stories participants tell of their experience making decisions at the intersection of different norms and values (Kempster & Carroll, 2016). Participants in this work are all leaders in the fields of business, education, and scholarship who, by virtue of their career choices, often find themselves at the point of impingement, pressured from multiple directions by multiple stakeholders with different needs and expectations. Kempster and Carroll's call to study responsibility through and within experience inspires me, and grounds the design of this study. Recognizing how adult learners can learn from the experience of others (Merriam, 2018), this study creates an opportunity for readers to learn from the rich and deep stories shared by participants.

Being responsible in decision-making is, in the present study, defined based on a review of literature about how the concept of responsible leadership is taken up in leadership literature in the fields of business and education. Responsible decisions require an individual in a formal or informal position of leadership (Dugan, 2017) to choose to see themselves as part of, or within, society (Maak & Pless, 2006a). Recognizing the importance of the long-term consequences of their decisions, and endeavouring to move beyond considering only short-term, self- and organizational interests in decision-making (Voegtlin, 2016), making a responsible decision requires a leader to elevate the interests of stakeholders in society, and to consider ecological and humanitarian challenges alongside economic metrics (Kempster & Carroll, 2016), despite the challenges involved (Brown, 2015).

The use of verbs like 'endeavour" are critical in that they frame responsibility not as a state of being but as intention—as action, behaviour, and choice. As participants share over and again, being responsible is a journey, not a destination. Being responsible in practice (in

decision-making) emerges as recursive, an on ongoing endeavour which requires commitment and engagement, patience and humility, perseverance and resiliency. As a participant researcher in this narrative inquiry, I am intrinsically part of the work presented. That said, I attended to Clandinin's (2013) twelve touchstones of narrative inquiry including sharing the analysis and findings with participants. Engaging in interpretivist epistemologies, I recognize that while individuals have agency, we are socially constructed, and that knowledge is developed through a process of interpretation. The present study is focussed on making change and improving the social outcomes of how leaders make decisions. As such, my choice to use a narrative approach (Clandinin, 2013), to focus on responsible leadership (Kempster & Carroll, 2016; Maak & Pless, 2006b; Voegtlin, 2016), and to draw on transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2006; Taylor & Cranton, 2012) as a lens through which to understand how adults learn to change, is purposeful. All three choices are about exploring experience and making social change. Perhaps not surprisingly, they also share some of the same concerns and critiques. I acknowledge that while the learnings from the present study are not widely generalizable, given that they arise from specific, contextualised environments, they nevertheless offer leaders the opportunity to learn from the experience of others, and they offer educators of leaders the opportunity to adapt curriculum and pedagogy to leverage new insights.

**Learnings**

Through the present study, learnings unfold—from the review of literature, and from the insights which emerged through the analysis of the stories that were shared. The verb 'unfolding' is used extensively by narrative inquirers Clandinin and Connelly (2000) to acknowledge that life is in constant motion, influenced by context, creating possibilities for the future, but never fixed (Clandinin, 2013). Similarly, there is no fixed solution to changing the practice of leaders

(Kempster & Carroll, 2016) or to addressing "the multi-dimensional nature of the kind of responsibility required to sustain movement on challenges that belong to no one, but impact many if not all of us" (p. 7). The present study offers, however, insights, understandings, and explanations that can have an impact on how leaders come to make more responsible decisions. In so doing, the learnings from this research inform the research question as well as address gaps in the current literature. They also contribute to efforts which focus on changing the practice of leaders while creating momentum toward further avenues of inquiry and exploration.

### *Responsible Leadership as a Concept*

Emerging from the literature are key notions about how responsible leadership as a concept is understood in the fields of business and education. These notions are valuable for several reasons including that they provide a basic understanding that being responsible—making responsible decisions—is challenging, involves multiple complexities, and creates possible risk for leaders. These notions also form the basis of how being responsible in decision-making is defined in the present study. Fundamentally, the ability of leaders to make choices is impacted and influenced by today's context which is broadly described as privileging economic metrics. Despite being primarily measured against parameters such as growth and profit, leaders are expected to use their agency to consider the interests of stakeholders (beyond shareholders), to think beyond self- and organizational interests, and to make efforts to address broader issues which impact society (Claar, et al., 2016). In so doing, the literature speaks to leaders needing to take a long-term perspective as opposed to focusing myopically on short-term results and gains.

### *Responsible Leadership as a Theoretical Framework*

A deep drill into responsible leadership as a theoretical framework draws attention to what scholars recognize as differentiating this evolving theory from other theories. Points of differentiation speak to how putting responsibility into the foreground (Carroll, 2016) adds value in the study, scholarship, and practice of leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006b). Responsibility, then, goes beyond accountability for delivering organizational and even legal or regulatory expectations. Scholars focussed on this theoretical framework also question the normative idea of leaders being response-able (Cameron, 2011). In other words, context matters, and not all leaders in all situations are able to be responsible or engage in a responsible manner. The theoretical framework specifically acknowledges how today's near-ubiquitous focus on achieving economic metrics creates barriers and challenges for leaders and responsible leadership. Being responsible also embodies the concept of having concern for others—the environment, human health, society—and accepting the consequences of one's decisions on more than the bottom line (Waldman & Galvin, 2008). Being responsible in decision-making means having a mindset in which leaders see themselves as part of society as a whole and, therefore, their decisions as part of something larger than their own interests or those of their organization.

### *Insights from the Present Study*

Recognizing the value of efforts to develop responsible leadership as a theory, Kempster and Carroll's (2016) call to study responsibility as something that leaders experience or consider within the practice of leadership is central to the present study. The concept that responsibility is part of [the act of] leading means it is not something that lies outside practice, and not something that should be considered external to their practice. The authors suggest, therefore, that we can

learn about what enables or disables the manifestation of responsibility in leadership by examining the practice of leadership (p. 4). The analysis of stories shared by participants leads to five insights which I identify and discuss at length in Chapter Five. These insights suggest that leaders choosing to engage responsibly should:

- Do the work needed to understand why responsibility matters to them—their origin story. In other words, leaders must explore their own lived experience to discover why this approach to leadership is a priority. In addition, leaders must come to define key concepts and terms personally, identify what they are willing to navigate around, what they are willing to negotiate about, and what they are not willing to compromise on.
- Build support systems including networks of like-minded people, sources of inspiration from literature or within organizations, and family and friends who can engage in their journey.
- Get prepared for the challenges they will face by being alert to the needs, expectations, and reactions of others; by considering their context carefully (organization, industry, society); by recognizing how their positionality may influence agency; and, by doing what they can to face professional and personal risk, as well as the possibility of others being put at risk because of their choices.
- Learn to engage strategically. Develop new skill and competencies, learn about the importance of time and timing in being responsible in decision-making and work to shift their mindset to a long-term horizon.
- Embrace continuous learning from their own experiences and through what they can learn from the experience of others. Being willing to learn from failure is key

> as is the openness to learn from both formal education and informal (unplanned) learning opportunities. In so doing, leaders can build resilience and remain optimistic.

As well as focussing on what constitutes responsible leadership and what is expected of responsible leaders, these insights help inform questions about "how." Specifically, they speak to the need for leaders to see being responsible as a life-long endeavor, a journey that requires preparation and a strategic approach. Stories about being prepared and strategic include the importance of leaders needing to focus on the long-term impact and consequence of decisions, not simply short-term gain. Participants share how being and staying cognizant of existing, new, and potential challenges is fundamental to making responsible decisions. Participants talk about not being naïve about the interests and motivations of others, and about how being responsible is aligned with being humble, patient, temperate, and expecting the unexpected. Participants note the need to abandon notions that pursuing responsible leadership is a way to gain recognition or reward in today's broader societal context. They speak to the value of considering the impact and influence of the context in which you work, and of being mindful of your positionality and the importance of timing in efforts to create change. They say that considering the interests of multiple stakeholders with varying perspectives and degrees of power and influence is challenging and risky, with both personal and professional consequences as well as consequences that can impact others.

Participants share how being responsible in decision-making is both an individual and collective activity which requires not only self-knowledge but a support system of like-minded individuals. Self-knowledge includes, for example, taking the time to reflect on your own stories of why and how being responsible is of specific interest to you. In addition, the importance of

developing one's own definitions and understandings of key concepts such success and failure emerge. Participants tell stories of needing to remain optimistic, embrace continuous learning, and invest in developing resiliency. While participants advocate the need to build capacity in collaboration and negotiation skills, they also note the necessity of identifying non-negotiables. Metaphors are used extensively by participants including those about knowing where one's line is, and of having a line in the sand.

### *Transformative Learning and Change*

Recognizing that making decisions at the intersection of opposing norms and values can be discomforting, transformative learning theory (TLT) offers a valuable lens through which to explore how, for adults, engaging with these kinds of experiences (personally and through the experiences of others) can create the opportunity for change (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). For educators of leaders seeking to deepen learning and support more responsible decision-making, storytelling as "a relational, emergent and nonlinear exchange that depends on both listening and post-story conversation" (Tyler & Swartz, 2012, p.455) is seen to "spark transformative learning" (p.465).

Drawing from TLT, I focus on key points which are most pertinent to my research. For example, scholars in the field note that transformative learning is most often triggered by either "epochal" (Mezirow, 2006, p. 117), significant, and challenging events, or events that accumulate over time creating discomfort. These types of experiences are those that do not fit into a person's existing beliefs about the world (Mezirow, 1991) and that create the need to question what they once took for granted. Transformative learning, then, involves an individual changing their frame of reference (habits of mind and points of view) as a result of an event, experience, or disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2006). Such change requires adult learners to go

through a process individually or with a facilitator to achieve a fundamental reconsideration of beliefs and values (Mezirow, 2003). For learning to be truly transformative, the change must translate into action and include a change in behaviour (Mezirow, 2003) which ultimately leads to adult learners becoming more empowering, inclusive, self-reflective, open, and integrative of change; more willing and able to promote autonomous and responsible lifelong thinking patterns; and more willing to engage in the world with a sense of community (Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Taylor, 2011).

## Considering Insights Alongside the Literature and Theory

Insights from the analysis of stories fill gaps in the literature and build upon key findings from the review of literature and theory. Their value is embedded in the rich perspectives they offer—going beyond statements about what needs to be done to acknowledge the feelings which emerge, the realities associated with facing unexpected dynamics, and the nuances involved in the intimate exploration of experience.

### *Filling Gaps*

The present study is grounded in Kempster and Carroll's (2016) call to focus on responsibility within leading and is informed by the ten dimensions and ten questions which they contend will help shape "the development of responsible leadership at and beyond the present time" (p. 4). The dimensions and associated questions are discussed in Chapter Two and presented in Appendix A. Collectively they reflect the authors' assertion that progress toward more responsible leadership requires engaging with a broad multidisciplinary understanding of responsibility and embracing the complexity associated with so doing. Given that the present study explores the stories participants tell of their experience at the intersection of opposing

norms and values, the insights shed light not only the research question and sub-questions, but also on some of the questions posed by Kempster and Carroll.

Kempster and Carroll's (2016) first dimension notes the need to pay attention to the connection between responsibility and the related field of CSR (Waldman & Balven, 2014). The authors ask about the assumptions underlying how responsibility is defined and understood, and "how these confront, clash with and extend responsibility in leadership?" (p. 4). Drawing on this research, I highlight how several participants have professionally been responsible for CSR initiatives in organizations and share frustrations about the challenge of associating responsibility to a financial metric. Participants specifically describe facing inner conflict in attempting to make decisions responsibly alongside the expectation that their decisions will benefit an organization in some manner (financially, brand, or reputation). One participant noted that "being responsible means different things to different people," and that responsibility cannot be reduced to a metric. Another participant refers to CSR as a "game" which is "played." Another participant notes that CSR is often used to silence those with the least power. In addressing the question posed by Kempster and Carroll, the present study exposes disconnects between organizational visions related to corporate social responsibility and the visions of leaders responsible for engaging communities and driving forward initiatives.

Another dimension and set of questions posed by Kempster and Carroll (2016) concerns the need to better understand the relationship between leadership, responsibility, and ethics—how ethical assumptions relate to notions of duty of care, for example. They also ask, "What kinds of questions, practices and identities would help those in leadership hold the kind of conversations where competing ethical principles could be aired?" (p. 5). Turning to the stories helps inform these queries. For example, while terms like ethics and responsibility are often

conflated, research participants spoke about them as interconnected, though different concepts. In many cases, participants spoke about ethics, in their own contexts, as meaning what is expected, legislated, mandated, or required of them in a role. In a sense, ethics emerges as something participants described as what they do—be ethical—or something they can be held accountable to externally. Responsibility emerges more as something they feel internally, something they are trying to be which involves care for others and thinking about the longer-term consequences of decisions. One educator, for example, shares her notion that "if you don't engage with your wider stakeholder group and privilege their needs and perspectives, you're going to do harm." One IMC member explains that they think "responsibility is about—when you know something is wrong and it is doing harm or could [do harm]," while another shares a story which taught them "how every decision you make, if it's not a good one," can cause harm. Here there exists a relationship between the terms and the concept. I interpret participants' stories to illustrate that there is an "and" proposition—that leaders must make ethical choices (legal, do less harm) *and* be responsible in their decision-making (think about broader, long-term consequences, and do good).

Related to Kempster and Carroll's (2016) eighth dimension, the authors note that responsible leadership implies a shared orientation, and ask, "What is opened up by bringing the collective into the picture of responsible leadership?" The present study is focussed on the individual; participants, however, reinforce in their stories the impact of societal context and of organizational context, and how change at all levels is needed if the future is to see more responsible decision-making. Adding an interpersonal dimension to the discussion, participants' stories call attention to the influence of spouses, children, parents, friends, supporters, and mentors. In much of the literature, such individuals are often not explicitly acknowledged, or are

seen to belong within the sphere of self. Given the number of stories in which they appeared, however, and the impact the individuals in this sphere can have on individuals focussing on responsibility and staying focussed on it, I suggest that the role of influencers and supporters be further explored and understood.

A final dimension to highlight is how Kempster and Carroll (2016) speak to responsibility to shareholders being historically conceptualized as focussed on the short-term, while responsibility to stakeholders has been aligned with long-term interests. They ask, "What tensions, conflicts and processes mediate between these different levels of responsibilities?" Participants' stories not only reinforce the existence of this dichotomy, they focus on how the concepts of time and timing are central in considering a future in which responsible leadership is the norm rather than the exception. I discuss this topic at length later in this chapter.

***Creating Depth***

While the review of literature and theory speaks to leaders facing complexity and risk, insights from participants underscore how the risks faced vary between disciplines and sectors. The insights also shine light on how positionality matters. Scholars note that receiving academic tenure enables them to act more freely (enhances their agency); practitioners speak about how carrying minimal financial debt is an important factor in their ability face risk.

Digging more deeply, participants in the scholar cohort speak passionately and with trepidation about the risks associated with failing to follow institutional expectations related to tenure. Not meeting prescribed expectations can impede the process and leave a hopeful scholar with few options. Driven to publish and focus on theory, scholar participants share how focussing on stakeholders and the real-world needs of communities, for example, is often delayed until some degree of academic security is assured. Participants from the issue

management/practitioner cohort speak to being isolated and shunned by colleagues and leaders for challenging normalized views. Loss of job or impact on career are ubiquitous fears, but mental health, risk to others including family, employees, and those for whom leaders strive to be responsible, are also discussed. These stories offer a depth of understanding of the concept of risk and reinforce the need participants share for preparation and strategic planning. They also point to additional complexities around the question, to whom a leader is responsible? Participants share, for example, how important it is to learn to be mindful of when, where, and with whom to raise concerns. Several participants emphasize how ill-timed interventions or raising concerns about responsible action to the wrong audience not only impacted them, but also reverberated on staff. Stories include the risk of a leader's children being approached by classmates who overhear dinner-time conversation about their friends' parent's professional standing and problems at work.

Another example of how the stories build upon and deepen theoretical discussion is how most participants discuss the value of education and development programs. While authors such as Cauthen (2016) and Martins and Lazzarin (2020), for example, are working to bolster leadership education related to responsibility in higher education, access and availability are challenges. While programs on corporate social responsibility, for example, are widely offered, they remain associated with furthering organizational goals and objectives (Tang, 2019) as opposed to responsibility as discussed in this work.

The insights also offer tangible examples from real world scenarios. Beyond validating conceptualizations and theories, the stories of experience shed light on actions, behaviours, choices, and decisions made in the moment, whilst feeling pressure from multiple conflicting norms and values. Participants elaborate on how they have learned to create space and time

whenever possible between different interests that require their attention. One RGL member, referring to contentious situations in which they are being squeezed by opposing sets of expectations, shares how they have come literally to tell others that they need to "sleep on it." They know that if they make a judgement call on the spot, they may not be making the best-reasoned call. Others comment on how they consciously engage with their own stories and memories to help guide them during challenging situations, a practice which can evoke physical responses such as stomach aches and headaches as well as mental stress and fear.

The literature speaks to the relational nature of responsible leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006a). What is seen, heard, and felt through participants' stories is the very critical role others play for participants. Stories about lessons shared, messages delivered, and discussions had with parents, teachers, mentors, professors, scholars, and spouses, for example, are recognized as providing inspiration, a safe space to debate and discuss, encouragement, and support for making difficult choices. It is also valuable to connect back with Mezirow's (2006) perspective that adult learning and transformation is "the process by which adults learn how to think critically for themselves rather than take assumptions supporting a point of view for granted" (p. 116). Participants gave no indication that they engaged consciously in what they identified as a "rational, metacognitive process of reassessing reasons that support problematic meaning perspectives or frames of reference, including those representing such contextual cultural factors as ideology, religion, politics, class, race, gender and others" (p. 117). Participants note, however, that sharing and reflecting on stories helped them learn and make connections they had not made earlier. Participants clearly engage with "a sense of self and others as agents capable of thoughtful and responsible action" (Mezirow, 2006, p. 127) who recognize the impact and influence of cultural and contextual influences on their decision-making. Stories also illustrate

the impact and influence of neoliberalism, for example, and discriminatory cultures in organizations.

## Addressing the Research Question and Sub-Questions

This narrative inquiry was purposively designed to address the main research question of how leaders can come to be more responsible in their decision-making, and to address four sub-questions: how participants come to understand responsibility in leadership; how their stories shed light on challenges associated with responsible decision-making; how their stories elucidate approaches to addressing the challenges; and how participants come to interpret their learnings and make meaning. Addressing these questions requires synthesizing the findings and insights.

### *How Participants Come to Understand Responsibility in Leadership*

The first sub-question focusses on how participants come to understand responsibility. Most participants tell and retell stories of experiences dating back to a moment in time when they remember encountering the concept of responsibility. I refer to these as origin stories. Ten of the twelve participants recall memories from childhood and young adulthood. Memories from this time period are associated with significant events such as accidents, being bullied, or experiencing other kinds of trauma. Participants share vivid stories of how the actions, behaviours, choices, and decisions of key figures in their lives had impact. Parental figures and teachers emerge over and again in these stories: The father of one participant worked actively in support of civil rights in the United States; another participant's religious mother focussed her energy and her family's priorities on the service of others. They share stories of learning conceptually about being responsible in decision-making and then themselves engaging deeply with responsibility as a result of an unplanned event or situation. For example, one participant from the RGL cohort speaks to attending a training course from which he learned about white

privilege. Not only did the course trigger deep interest in understanding how he, as a white male could be silencing voices at work, he proceeded to engage with his wife and three daughters to open dialogue for the first time about topics such as misogyny and harassment. Participants essentially transitioned from having only a conceptual understanding to engaging in more transformative learning as, at various points in their lives, the topic of responsibility became personally relevant. One participant from the Issues Management/practitioner cohort told and retold a story about their stepfather who always talked about his responsibility to take care of his employees, and how seriously he considered his decisions given the impact they had on the lives of others. This practitioner shared the same story as pivotal in their decision-making at various points in their career. Participant stories highlight how they each as individuals came to the point of needing to deliberately define concepts around responsibility—from what success and failure mean personally to parameters and non-negotiables, lines they are not willing to cross.

### *How Stories Shed Light on Challenges Associated with Responsible Decision-Making*

Words like complexity and risk appear in the literature in relation to responsible leadership but come alive in the stories shared. Participants describe for example the need to stay alert and anticipate "blowback" as one member of the IMC cohort called it. Not privileging conventional norms and values can create contestation from literally anywhere and anyone. For example, one scholar shares a story about working at an international organization focussed on human rights. After spending months in a community working with local citizens regarding the possibility of a major extraction industry company developing a project on their land, the scholar reported to their management in the human rights organization that there was no responsible path forward given the concerns of the community. The scholar remembers how colleagues and supervisors at the human rights organization called him difficult and were unaccepting of his

conclusion. Told they had to find a way to have the community accept some form of corporate social responsibility initiative, the participant recalls facing a schism between their organization's stated mission and the reality that the organization was paid by industries to negotiate paths forward. Referring to themselves as "naïve," the story reflects how challenges emerge from unexpected sources. Needing to stay aware of one's context and one's own positionality (experience, maturity in the organization) is discussed as requiring constant vigilance given the ever-changing situations that leaders find themselves in.

Stories also speak to the inherent risks from engaging with multiple stakeholders with unequal power, and how the risks leaders face are not limited just to career, but to mental and physical well-being as well as to others (family, colleagues, employees, mentors), including risk to stakeholders those leaders may be trying to privilege. While participants share the value of learning from experience, they reinforce how no two situations are the same. One participant warns of taking "a cookie cutter" approach while several others share stories of challenges faced having miscalculated when, where, how, and with whom they raised concerns and issues. Participants speak at length about being cognizant of time and timing (when to engage, for example). One IMC cohort member made a comparison between timing an intervention (raising concerns about responsible action) to introducing a legislative bill. Based on lived experience, they note how bringing forward proposed legislation at the wrong time or with the wrong pieces of other legislation can sideline efforts not only in the short-term but possibly forever. Similarly they contend that recommending an alternative, more responsible approach to a challenge at the wrong time, to the wrong person can face the same fate.

Besides challenges from the external world, leaders face issues related to shifting their own mindset to long-term success as opposed to short-term gains. Leaders share having to learn

new skills and competencies and needing support which doesn't always materialize. While education emerges as having been valuable for participants, not all leaders have the means (financial, time, support) to pursue higher education or engage in development opportunities. A final but key challenge shared by participants is coming to accept consequences for doing what they believe is "right." As many participants said, being responsible is not a path or a journey for those seeking external accolades. The complexities and risks which emerge from the stories are varied and nuanced. Thus there is no complete list of challenges, nor are there grand solutions to address the myriad of issues shared. Rather, the stories of experience offer insights into the challenges these leaders encounter and how they continue to address them.

### *How Participants Address the Challenges*

How participants come to address the challenges is relevant to the discussion around whether leaders truly are response-able (Cameron & Caza, 2005; Felt, 2016)—able to be responsible—within today's context given the significant expectations included in responsible leadership. The stories shared highlight how participants have endeavoured to address the challenges faced.

**Dealing With Conflicting Values and Norms**. Participants spoke about the challenge of dealing with situations where their personal beliefs about what constitutes a responsible decision and the apparent beliefs of their organizations came into conflict. Stories offer insights into how participants dealt with the inner conflict—at times navigating around the issue or deciding to not confront the issue; at times negotiating with others to find a compromise; and at times taking a stand and being willing to deal with the consequences up to and including leaving or being fired. The stories highlight emotions associated with such clashes, the physical and emotional toll, and the importance of relationships with like-minded people and support systems

in working through the decision-making. In addition to having people with whom to engage, discuss, and debate how best to handle conflict, learning to personally step back, create some space to think, and not simply react are strategies that emerge in the stories. Reflecting on experience or on the experiences of others also comes to the fore as do learnings from formal and informal learning. As one scholar said, even after decades of experience they were recently unable to react to an unexpected situation in a manner they felt was responsible. If unable in the moment to reflect on how to respond responsibly, taking the time to consider the situation in hindsight, individually and with like-minded people, can be helpful for the future.

**Developing Confidence to Act.** Stories shared by participants focus on the importance of coming to know one's non-negotiables as central to dealing with the challenge of developing confidence, and central to what one scholar refers to as "stepping in and stepping up into responsibility." Using many metaphors and clichés such as knowing "your line in the sand" or "the line you won't cross," participants share stories of doing the difficult work of determining what key concepts mean to them: What does it mean to be ethical, for example? What does it mean to be responsible? Why does it matter? What constitutes success and failure personally? Over and again, participants said that while being part of an organization which aligns (at least to some extent) with their personal values is important; being responsible in decision-making is not about organizational values posted on the wall. To be clear, they share how formal and informal values of an organization have impact on their agency, but in their stories they speak specifically to finding themselves in situations where they felt compelled to move beyond best practices, regulations, and even organizational values to do their work in a way that was in line with their own notion of what being responsible means. For example, one of the stories shared involves an IMC cohort member thinking back to how they chose to engage with families after a bus tragedy.

They share how they felt compelled to speak with the families in a way they felt was responsible, not in the way mandated by their organization. Another IMC member speaks about finding a way to be responsible to all stakeholders during a crisis, not just the stakeholders privileged and decreed to be important by a vice president. Participants speak about relying on their own sense of right and wrong and being willing to challenge convention as something they felt compelled to do. Participants insist that being responsible in decision-making is not about heroism; it is about following a path and being the kind of leader they recognize it is important to be. At the same time, participants speak to situational realities and how they have also made choices or reacted in ways that were not responsible. Having to live with those decisions and grow from them also emerges as part of what they often refer to in terms of a journey—a journey towards trying to lead responsibly.

Understanding how and why a leader comes to privilege and care about the concept of responsibility also emerges as fundamental to developing confidence to make choices. I refer to these as participants' origin stories. These stories illuminate how lived experience has influenced how participants engage in situations where they are at the point of impingement. Examples include stories about how individuals were raised (culture, education, exposure to diversity, religious education); expectations set for them; behaviours exhibited by influential figures such as parents, coaches, and teachers; traumatic events such as accidents; and bullying or witnessing the consequence of irresponsible behaviour.

**Recognizing Responsibility is a Journey**. The insights include not only the importance of being prepared to engage strategically, build support systems, and know one's non-negotiables; mindset and continuous learning also emerge as key to facing the challenges. Developing an optimistic attitude and growing resilience are without doubt challenging when

facing risk, opposition, and pressure to conform to conventional norms. Being in relationship with others and engaging in self-reflection are important factors that contribute to mindset. In addition, the insights bring to the fore how participants refer to and approach responsible leadership as evolution, a journey, not an item on a checklist or an objective. This perspective helps inform the question of how leaders can face risk. Keeping focussed on long-term versus short-term gains becomes essential. Not being defined solely by a title or role, job grade, or position is fundamental to making more responsible decisions. If success is defined by economic metrics and determined against a limited time horizon, choices become even more limited. One approach discussed by several participants is to reframe being responsible—to approach it not as requiring super-human skill, but rather the opposite; to engage in the journey by building patience, engaging with humility, and maintaining momentum through hopeful skepticism. Not trying to get every decision right, but consciously trying to be responsible in decision making supports a mindset of continuous learning. Participants speak to the need of being mindful of the realities of today's context or, as one participant from the RGL cohort called it, "the mean-spiritedness of neoliberal policies which are absolutely disgraceful in human terms," while maintaining hope that change will continue to be forged by committed individuals and new generations of leaders for whom the environment and responsibility to societal concerns are important.

### *How Participants Come to Interpret Their Learnings and Make Meaning*

The final sub-question focusses on how participants come to interpret their learnings and make meaning. This question aligns with Kempster and Carroll's (2016) seventh proposition which speaks to how responsible leadership "engages with processes of sense-making and sense-giving strongly linked with questions of purpose" (p. 5). My interpretation of the participants'

stories leads to an understanding of the central importance of having a purpose or commitment to try to be responsible. The path to articulating such a purpose is itself complex—requiring self-reflection and engagement with others to discuss and debate, make choices, learn from failure, accept consequences of decisions, reframe success, and face risk.

Making meaning and learning requires intensive engagement, then, with experience. Interestingly, the present study itself was recognized by participants as an opportunity to make meaning of their own experiences. Through the intentional telling and retelling of stories, going backward and forward in time, reflecting on the present and considering the future (Clandinin, 2013), several participants identified themes in their own stories and made connections that had not been apparent to them. For example, a scholar and a member of the issue management cohort both reflect on how engaging in multiple interviews as part of this research led them to recognize how their past has influenced their present circumstances—specifically of being told they are "too responsible." Now in mid to late career they reflect on how, having experienced tragedy and significant complexity in their childhood, they assumed roles and responsibilities far beyond their chronological ages. Told now by family members, colleagues, and their own leaders that they take on responsibility that is either impossible or not theirs to assume, they share how their past influences the present. With hope, they also both share the possibility for changing their trajectory for the future and coming to a better, healthier approach to being responsible. Stories through which other participants connect the meaning and importance they place on the concept of being responsible today with their upbringing include one participant whose family history as members of a persecuted minority was ever-present; others speak to religious or cultural training that involved service to others.

For members of the RGL/educator cohort, teaching and engaging with students emerges as a place where they themselves make meaning. For issue leaders in the IMC/practitioner cohort, stories of mentoring others and supporting the new generation of leaders emerges as a key place where sharing stories of experience enables them to interpret their learnings. For scholars, attaining tenure equates to being able to purposively choose what work to do, with whom, and for which stakeholder(s). Participants' stories elucidate how they have learned from others and learned from being at the intersection of opposing expectations themselves. For some, their origin stories are "epochal," or stemming from a life crisis, but for most their perspectives have developed cumulatively (Mezirow, 2006). These insights align with key tenets of transformative learning theory (TLT) which speak to change in behaviour or frames of reference being a process (Mezirow, 1991). Although it was beyond this study's goal, new research could explore whether leaders recognize themselves engaging in a process, and how it may align with the rigorous process outlined by Mezirow. They have chosen roles which expose them regularly to negotiating between opposing norms and values. They have also, over time and through dialogue with others, come to be introspective about their own feelings and actions as well as to seek to understand those of others. They question conventional norms and values and look for alternatives—exploring options including taking different approaches and even leaving their place of employment. This again aligns with Mezirow's (2006) perspective that adults explore options "for new roles, relationship and action" (p.117). Questioning let alone challenging, conventional norms is precisely what advocates of responsible leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006) call for, and is the root of TLT. Thus, it is through sharing their stories of experience and engaging with others that participants learn. Their learning emerges in the present study as their

insights. Their meaning-making has emerged over time and often as a result of feeling discomforted, being at the point of impingement time and again.

### *How Leaders Can Come To Make More Responsible Decisions*

The key takeaway from the present study is that learning to make more responsible decisions is possible at the individual level; however, it requires investing significant, deliberate, and intentional effort in changing and transforming one's perspective and, ultimately, behaviour. The insights emerging from the present study magnify the importance of leaders needing to prepare to face and address challenges and complexities that accompany the consideration of alternative approaches to conventional norms and values. Leaders must recognize that this magnitude of change requires being in relation with other like-minded individuals and building a support system. Reflecting on and understanding why responsibility is a priority is central in grounding personal definitions of key concepts including what success and failure look and feel like, what your non-negotiables will be, and how you will develop the skills and competencies to engage strategically. Investing energy and attention in continuous learning, remaining humble and able to learn from failure, and developing a resilient mindset are all key in order to make decisions while at the point of impingement, squeezed by multiple stakeholders with multiple and various priorities.

Being more responsible in one's actions, choices, and decisions transcends learning about a new theory or framework. It transcends believing in a concept and exploring literature. Being more responsible in decision-making requires transformative learning and, ultimately, change. For those who currently hold titled positions of leadership, those who lead without titles, those who wish to lead, and those who teach leaders about responsibility, what is required is that mindsets be reframed. What is required is that leaders "think critically . . . rather than take

assumptions supporting a point of view for granted" (Mezirow, 2006, p. 127). Said differently, what is required is that leaders recognize that there is in fact a problem with what is seen as normal and conventional in today's context (Brown, 2015)—a context which makes making responsible decisions challenging. What is required is to do the difficult work of learning, and then choosing to do things in a manner and within a context that will not only be challenging and pose risks, but which will erect barriers over and again. Choice must translate into action, into doing things differently and continuing to learn, develop, and build resilience.

Until significant shifts occur in organizations and at the level of society, leaders will continue to face challenges, risks, and barriers. Depending on their roles, they may face such challenges regularly. Thus, for responsible decision-making to become the norm rather than the exception, change at the individual level (the focus of the present study) reflects only one piece of a much larger puzzle. Focus on broader change is outside the scope of the present study, but valuable work by other researchers is under way. The COVID-19 pandemic itself is being seen to open the door for discussion about social change and the possibility of questioning normalized values. Recognizing that the enactment of responsible leadership in everyday life by everyday leaders remains a "long-term endeavour . . . [which needs] to be approached on both individual and systemic levels to be effective (Pless & Maak, 2011, p. 4), the present study offers leaders and the educators of leaders a better understanding of what can be done.

**Framing The Practice of Making More Responsible Decisions**

The five insights which emerge from the analysis of participants' stories offer a way to imagine how leaders can learn the practice of making more responsible decisions. They also shine a light on how important lived experience and the sharing of stories has been for the participants. Considering the present study's findings and the insights from my analysis of

participants' stories, I contend that what also emerges is an opportunity to better frame responsible leadership for practitioners.

While important debate, discussion, research, and theorizing continue around the concept of responsibility and responsible leadership as a theoretical framework, furthering the practice of responsibility remains a priority. Returning to Kempster and Carroll (2016), I draw upon their intent and desire to "provoke and move on the debate around leadership and responsibility" (p. 13) toward real transformation of relationships, structures, and practices. I experiment with the metaphor of art to illustrate how engaging as a leader in responsible leadership is akin to an artist practicing a certain style of painting. Using this metaphor may help leaders recognize the importance of the frame and canvas upon which they practice their leadership, the constraints they must work within, the anticipated challenges and so on. I begin with the importance of having clarity about the style or tradition of painting (the purpose or vision, use of materials, techniques, best practices) an artist chooses—what it means, for example, to paint in the impressionist style or, in the case of leaders, what it means to be a responsible leader. I also hope this frame can help educators of leaders enable individuals to engage and see themselves in the practice of more responsible decision-making.

Recognizing that there are individual, contextual, and experiential factors that influence the style of art or leadership one chooses to practice, artists and leaders have some agency in deciding the direction they wish to take. They can also make decisions to try other styles or approaches. In the world of art, one may think of artists who engage in abstract expressionism, impressionism, realism, and surrealism. In leadership, one can talk about leaders who choose a style of leadership or focus on a theory of leadership such as transformational leadership or transactional leadership. When artists or leaders select to work in a certain tradition, it is

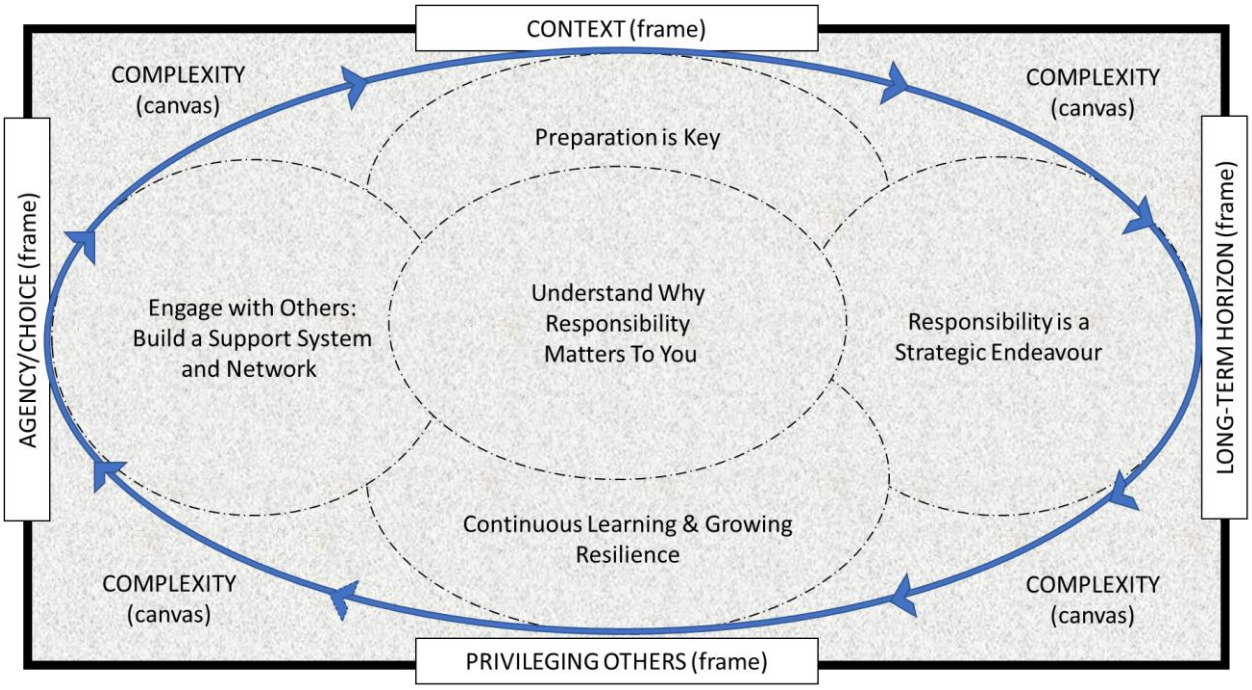
important for them to learn about the boundaries and best practices associated with their chosen approach. For example, an impressionist and an artist who works in the abstract engage with different visions and different interests, and privilege different priorities. Given that their purpose is different, the frames in which they work, the canvas, the materials they choose, and the techniques they employ, vary. The language or words they use may also differ and the mindset they bring to their work is shaped in part by their choice of style or approach.

At any given point in history, a certain style in art or theory of leadership may be the norm, be popular, and reflect the values of the day. With time, contexts change, but for artists or leaders who engage with a style that is not the norm, or not at least supportive of conventional values, being seen and heard, respected, and privileged can be extremely challenging. In these ways and many more, the metaphor of leaders as artists can be explored. For the purposes of the present study, I suggest that approaches to leadership such as responsible leadership or distributed leadership are each framed in a specific manner. Understanding how and why they are framed as they are can support those leaders with an interest in an approach to leadership. My intent is not to disparage, compare, or contrast different styles of art or approaches to leadership, but to look specifically at responsible leadership and contextualize it within its own unique frame. In so doing, I seek to provoke discussion and thus movement on the topic of how to help leaders engage more actively in the process. In framing the five insights as interconnected components of the broader discussion about how leaders can come to make more responsible decisions, I wish to promote dialogue.

Figure 3 shows leaders choosing to engage in responsible leadership within a frame that is defined by literature and theory. At the top is the notion that leaders work within a specific contextual reality; to the left is their agency or ability to act and make choices independently.

Their ability to act and make choices is constrained by the context (at the top) and influenced by expectations to focus on others and the long-term (set by the frame below and across from it). As framed below, leaders must recognize themselves as part of society, privileging others in decision-making and helping to address global challenges. Across from agency, the right-hand side of the frame is bounded by the need to consider long-term consequences of decisions on stakeholders, not just shareholders. The frame used by a leader focussed on transformation would be bounded by different expectations and constraints.

Figure 3 Framing the Practice of Making More Responsible Decisions




Building on the metaphor, the canvas upon which leaders develop their perspective on responsibility is textured and represents the notion that complexity abounds. The canvas is dynamic, shaped by hills and valleys which make being responsible challenging and which require leaders to navigate and negotiate an uneasy and shifting surface. As a newer concept or style, responsibility in leadership is still being developed and understood; therefore, things are more fluid. Imagine for a moment how different the frame and canvas would be for transactional

leaders. The frame could be set by clear objective goals and the canvas would be more straightforward with structured and measurable rules and expectations. Even though styles of art or approaches to leadership are framed in different ways, no two artists' work will be identical. Every artist and every leader will explore and experiment, test the boundaries, and introduce new dimensions.

**Is Responsible Leadership Possible?**

Given the benefit of hindsight and based on thousands of hours spent with participants and their stories, I realize that what I heard, discussed, read, and analyzed were experiences of leaders *trying* to be responsible. A nuance, perhaps, but one that I realize in retrospect is an important one. Occasionally, participants describe themselves as having been responsible. However, in most cases, even those descriptions are followed by some caveat akin to "in that moment," "at that time," or "in that situation." Thus the stories they shared were not primarily about being responsible in decision-making, but about *trying* to be responsible within complex contexts, influenced by a prodigious list of factors. Indeed, a valuable focus of future inquiry may be to explicitly explore the notion of being responsible versus simply trying to *be*. Does the use of verbs like 'try' and 'trying' have a specific meaning or consequence? Having recognized an important nuance here, I reviewed my own writing and note the use of verbs such as endeavouring, seeking, and striving. Why do I and others liberally use 'try' and 'trying' in our stories and reflection? Curious, I look to the insights to shed light on this question.

Beginning with how frequently the verbs appear in the stories shared in Chapter Five, I draw out the following insights and consider possible connections. One key insight involves participants sharing stories about the importance of engaging with humility (not with visions of grandeur, of being rewarded, or of a superhero ideal). Perhaps, then, these verbs are used

intentionally to demonstrate an effort to be humble, to demonstrate understanding of the complexities and challenges of being responsible in decision-making. Participants describe the nature of responsibility as something of a journey, or as something one works toward becoming. In this context, 'trying' reflects the temporal aspect of being responsible in decision-making. The verb 'becoming' also catches my interest and it, too, emerges over and again in the stories. This leads to the key insight around time and timing which emerges in the stories. I circle back to the stories and recognize that while I found connection between leaders being responsible and needing to consider when to engage and take a longer-term view, I had not recognized the nuance that perhaps the time being responsible takes is itself a factor in the slow rate of change.

Responsibility, being responsible, and making responsible decisions emerge over and again in this work associated with the concept of temporality. That said, time as measured by the hands on a clock emerges in today's context as what I interpret to be an enemy of responsibility. Participants refer to temporal aspects of responsibility in many ways: Time is needed for leaders to evolve and become more responsible; to recalibrate the definition of success to the long term; to engage strategically in a discussion related to responsibility; to reflect, consider, and contemplate; and, to be strategic, thoughtful, and mindful. Time also emerges in discussion about making quality decisions and using good judgement. Thus, calls for more responsibility in decision-making and in leadership can be interpreted as setting aside or, at least, balancing demands for efficient time management and productivity as understood as a variable over time. In today's context, few question the aphorism popularized by Benjamin Franklin that "time is money." Tension between the concept of time and responsibility emerges in the present study and offers the opportunity for a new or at least more nuanced avenue of inquiry—more

specifically, how the concept of time and temporality may be central to a future with more responsible leadership.

Associated with the concept that being responsible in decision-making is a change and a transformation, it is worthwhile noting how the verb 'becoming' is also intrinsic in transformative learning theory. Mezirow (2000) notes that "transformational learning is one's becoming critically aware of tacit assumptions/expectations and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation" (p. 4), and that we "learn to become critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives" (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978, p.101). Whether one is an adult learner or the educator of adults, transforming or facilitating transformation is tied to the concept of becoming or evolving. This again links back to dimensions of time. Words associated with the verb 'becoming' include growing, metamorphizing, altering, and changing, all of which reaffirm this temporal aspect. Thus, being responsible requires time, yet taking time does not assure outcomes. I am even more curious about how or whether this temporal aspect itself rubs up against today's norms and values, and as a result influences the key notion of agency and choice. Could the use of the various verbs reflect growing apprehension about being able to be responsible in today's context? Is being responsible becoming but a pipe dream? A fantasy?

This question is fed by Martin and Lazzarin's (2020) discussion about how being responsible has become so complex that the path forward now requires addressing the lack of clarity between what is responsible and what is irresponsible. They underscore the concern that lack of responsibility among leaders is not happening because there is a lack of clarity around irresponsibility. Others like Johnson (2018) note that the lack of clarity around what is and isn't irresponsible is leading to more wrongdoing and abuse in organizations. Whether the issue is

lack of clarity or just too much complexity, the investment required to be responsible is high. Perhaps the current framing of responsibility leaves the majority feeling unable to grapple with this most human value. While not in the scope of this work, this reflection spotlights one of many new questions and avenues the present study opens.

**The Unasked Question**

While I did not ask participants about why they care about being responsible in terms of the decisions they make, insights to this immensely interesting and ultimately very important question do emerge from participants' stories. Asking why anyone would choose to engage seems obvious in hindsight. Not one individual said that their choices to study or research responsibility or practice leadership responsibly stemmed from mandates or expectations explicitly stated. But, in sharing stories about the origins of their interest in responsibility, their early experiences with responsibility, and memories related to people in their lives privileging others over self-interest, the answer percolates up. Nine participants described how lived experiences in childhood and young adulthood, words spoken, and behaviour demonstrated by parents and teachers had immense impact on their mindset and how and why they choose to engage at the point of impingement—willing to juggle multiple, conflicting norms and values in their decision-making. The origin stories of two participants focus on higher education where the work of other scholars and professors sparked initial curiosity and remains motivational.

For the participants who delved deeply into origin stories stemming from childhood, their memories align with what Mezirow (2006) initially called disorienting dilemmas. The stories include experiencing loss; needing to step into positions of responsibility early on in life; making meaning from highly emotional experiences including accidents; experiencing bullying; remembering significant figures in their life; demonstrating care for others above self; or being

inspired by the work of others giving voice to the negative impact of current-day norms and values on responsibility. Going back in time helped participants make meaning and make sense of the present day and consider plans for dealing with anticipated challenges. I contend that how leaders can come to be more responsible in their decision-making begins with exploring their own why. Even though research participants in this work are mature and experienced professionals in their fields, the majority comment on how engaging in the present study, and discussing their own experiences with responsibility as opposed to their theoretical knowledge, conceptual ideas, or their practice, led them to better understand themselves and their path. The possibility emerges to consider how educators of leaders could, through facilitated dialogue and engagement, truly bring the process of transformative learning in relation to responsible leadership to life.

**A Word on Judgement**

The word judgement appears several times in my review of literature and theory. For example, Voegtlin (2016) speaks to how being responsible involves being able to make informed ethical judgements about prevailing norms and values. Gardiner (2017) reinforces the perspective that who a leader is and how they see themselves in the world influences not only how they judge what is responsible in others, but also what they perceive as responsible action for themselves. The concept of judgement also emerges related to narrative inquiry and in relation to transformative learning theory when Mezirow (2006) speaks to the process of transformative learning leading to individuals "participating fully and freely in dialectical discourse to validate a best reflective judgement" (p. 118).

Teaching in a business school and pursing my graduate education in a faculty of education leads me to engage with the work of a variety of authors and publications across the

two fields. In a recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* that piqued my interest in the concept of judgement, Likierman (2020) writes: "A lot of ink has been spilled in the effort to understand what good judgement consists of" (para. 2). I was reminded of Duke's (2018) *Judgment and the Preparation of Educational Leaders*. Duke defines judgement as "the ability to arrive at and make a choice when faced with incomplete information, uncertain conditions, and/or competing goals and values" (p. 119) and argues that along with related topics including decision making are critical in the education of leaders. Along similar lines, advocating the importance of developing judgement in the education of business leaders, Tichy and Bennis's (2007) work, *Judgment: How Winning Leaders Make Great Calls,* speaks to judgement as the core of exemplary leadership. They define judgement as the ability to combine personal qualities with relevant knowledge and experience to form opinions and make decisions.

The word judgement does not emerge in any significant way in the stories shared by participants. That said, given that the language I used focusses on decision-making, I conjecture that participants simply use the same term. I reflect on the word and having not considered it more critically and teased out how and if judgement and decision-making are recognized as discreet albeit interconnected terms, or whether they are conflated in the minds of participants. While the scope of the present study precludes a deeper investigation into the concept of judgement, future research on the topic in relation to responsible leadership would be valuable.

**Conclusion**

I conclude by sharing reflections from a member of the RGL cohort who states unequivocally that "self interest has led to a world with massive social and environmental issues." In expressing hope for the future in terms of the next generation, however, they speak to the important role that education can play in terms of both conceptual and transformative

learning. As an educator, this participant challenges students and young professionals to get involved in issues and challenges that are "messy" early in their careers. They actively encourage and "implore" students not to keep their heads down but rather to think about who they are, what is important to them, and who is important—and to do that early in their careers and to do it often. They also insist that being responsible in their decision-making is not a tabletop exercise, simply saying to classes that learning and thinking is not enough:

> You must step up and practice it. Be willing to brush with this challenge of your vision, your version of what it means to be a responsible leader. And, yeah, you'll have encounters with people perhaps who don't share the same perspectives. Learn to decide: Will you approach them? When will you engage and how? Recognize there are many ways to make change. You must start early and build your foundation. For the most part, I feel there's no point ramming things down people's throats. Being intolerant of a different perspective or more limiting perspective is not usually helpful. I think it's more strategic and successful to approach all sides with an open mind but without giving up on your convictions.

This same RGL lecturer speaks about the value of education in responsible leadership, stating, "The opportunity is to open the door to these discussions early and frequently, to encourage leaders and future leaders to get out of their comfort zones and be uncomfortable." This participant advocates for their students to develop for themselves a perspective on what they value beyond money and learn to speak up about their values and focus on more than just what will lead to the next promotion.

Hopeful and optimistic, the present study informs and fills gaps in scholarship, offers insights for leaders and the educators of leaders, and identifies many avenues for further

research. Rich and descriptive, the stories help elucidate how leaders can individually come to be more responsible in their decision-making and how educators can, for example, support growth and development. However, once again, focus must return to today's context and the seemingly immutable focus on economic metrics. While so much of what is understood as 'normal' today is being re-examined as a result of the current pandemic, and while the possibility for change seems a bit brighter with the galvanization of movements including #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, I am left thinking critically about the future.

While some participants speak bluntly and candidly about coming to understand the impact of today's "neoliberal governing rationality" and the "era of selfishness" in which we now live, others speak more broadly about the impact of the economization of all aspects of human life and value. In so doing, they all discuss experiences which speak to the systemic challenges associated with privileging, for example, stakeholders over shareholders. Regardless, only one participant brought forward the concept of changing the system, of facilitating or working toward a paradigm shift. When leaders recognize the context and its implications, and still do not bring forward discussion about challenging the system, what does that indicate? I consider this a critical gap and an important avenue for future inquiry.

## Chapter Seven: Limitations, Implications, Conclusions, and Possibilities

I am concerned in the present study with the ways in which studying responsibility through the stories of experience can enable progress toward leaders making more responsible decisions. I build upon Kempster and Carroll's (2016) work in asserting that continued focus on the "imagination of possibilities or more emotional and exciting visions" (p.13) is insufficient in transforming how leaders make decisions when they are at the intersection of opposing and conflicting expectations norms and values. Recognizing that a future in which responsible decision-making is more the norm than the exception requires transformation at all levels (individual, organizational and societal), I focus purposively on the individual. Drawing on transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2006; Taylor & Cranton, 2012), I contend that leaders today use a problematic mindset in their decision making—one that is imbued with neoliberal assumptions and expectations which privilege growth and profit. What emerges from the present study is that while it is possible to elevate the needs and expectations of stakeholders alongside economic priorities, doing so is highly complex; it requires reflexive and relational practices, active engagement, and a long-term perspective. The analysis of stories from participants provides rich insights into the experience of being at the point of impingement, of being squeezed from multiple directions by individuals and groups with different if not opposing views. The insights highlight how leaders can learn from both their own experiences and those of others to be more responsible in their decision-making. The insights also fill gaps in the existing literature and shine light on how educators can assist and improve the ability of learners to make change.

**Limitations**

As in any research study, there are limitations with this research. Some of the limitations I had anticipated but others emerge upon reflection now that the work is completed. The three main limitations have to do with reliance on memory, with relevance and reliability, and with the issue of scope. To begin, any narrative inquiry revolves around the stories human beings tell. Thus we rely on individual memory to provide the data. As I noted in Chapter Three, memory, being created over time, is subjective and susceptible to moral fiction (Pagano, 1991). As participants share their stories and the meaning they make, I remain mindful that these are stories mostly embedded in the past. Storied and re-storied over time, they are indeed valuable but can reflect the reality people have chosen perhaps consciously or unconsciously to make and remember. Their stories reflect interpretations they have made of actual events.

Subjectivity in research is, then, both a positive and a challenge. In the present study, the intense personal nature of the stories amplifies the value of focusing on the individual and their interpretations. However, this very strength also creates limitations including how relatable or relevant their stories are to others. The findings cannot be generalized, to be sure; however, believing in the power of stories and of stories of experience in adult learning, I remain confident that readers will be able to some extent to reflect and consider responsibility in the context of leadership.

The scope of the present study includes scholars who are dedicated academicians, educators who lecture on responsible leadership, and practitioners whose roles and careers are predicated on dealing with the challenge of being at the point of impingement where they must consider expectations stemming from different norms and values. With participants representing the three cohorts plus my own contribution as a participant researcher, I am at once thankful for

the extensive data collected and thoughtful about the benefits and risks of either including more leaders or fewer in future research. While a total of a dozen participants is substantial in a narrative inquiry, more research needs to be conducted to learn how the insights might be interpreted by others, and to engage with different cohorts to explore their experiences.

With hindsight, gaps and opportunities become evident—opportunities to engage with other audiences, ask different questions, do more, and do some things differently. Hindsight and reflection on this study informs recommendations for further research, the education of leaders, and possibilities for practice.

Participants in the present study were all versant about the challenges posed by today's context, and many specifically spoke to the impact of neoliberalism. While their informed insight adds value and depth to the findings, it raises the question of whether these participants are reflective of leaders today or, because of the purposive approach taken to select them, they are unique. Upon reflection I believe they are the latter. Thus, I do not suggest that we can take for granted that leaders, broadly speaking, recognize the challenges posed by today's context. Given the extent to which economic metrics now define the value of a person professionally (and to some extent personally), and how decades of leadership development and training have focused on building competencies to further individual and organizational effectiveness, efficiency, growth, and profit, a question for further research might be, To what extent do leaders question the influence of today's context on responsible leadership?

The participants lack diversity in terms of age and experience. When purposively selecting participants, I was mindful of including interested parties from across the three fields and was pleased with the equal gender representation (six men and five women). What I had not considered is how the demographic would be skewed toward those in mid to late career. While

not a negative in terms of garnering valuable insights, the homogeneity leaves open the opportunity for future research with participants who are at earlier points in their leadership careers. Further, only a quarter of the participants identify as non-white. Diversity or the lack thereof raises many further questions for future inquiry.

Concerning the scope of the present study, I struggle with whether, as a narrative inquiry, including fewer participants in order to engage in even more in-depth interviews with each one might have been wise. Because of space limitations, I have struggled to present stories in their richest form. At the same time the wealth of insights from the participants' stories has been immeasurable.

## Recommendations

In Chapter Six I shared my interest in conducting future research stemming from the insights. For example, I am fascinated about the prospect of investigating the entanglement of responsible decision-making and judgement. I also see value in exploring why verbs such as *trying* and *becoming* are used so extensively in the stories of experience related to responsible decision-making. I am also curious about whether developing a better understanding of the role of others (networks and support systems) in a leader's journey could inform efforts to help them make more responsible decisions. By further reflecting on this work—with the gift of hindsight, informed by the limitations and challenges, with learnings and insights in hand—I also make the following recommendations:

### *For Research and Scholarship*

Future research related to the experience of leaders making decisions at the intersection of opposing norms and values should expand to include leaders representing a broader demographic in terms of age and experience. This recommendation is informed by a participant's

refection: “Something to think about for this idea of responsible leadership is who can do it? What kind of power do you have to have to enable you to engage in this type of work?” Given the positionality of participants, the opportunity to engage with those with less experience may offer valuable additional insights.

The value of engaging in similar research but with a critical lens would also be elucidating. It is curious that despite expressing frustration with today’s social context and referring to the need for change, only one of the participants brought forward the need explicitly to question and strive to challenge the system. In this regard, I, as a research participant, also fell short, focusing on working within and challenging the system that exists. I return to the demographic of participants (mid to late career) and ask whether engaging with early to mid career leaders focussed on responsible leadership would impact the discourse related to systemic change.

Future research focusing on dimensions of diversity might also thicken and enrich the findings given that a quarter of participants in this research are visible minorities (non-white), half are women and two-thirds have lived and worked in multiple countries on two continents (North America and Europe). Engaging with leaders from other geographic areas and other cultural contexts would be valuable. The topic of gender and leadership also represents a crucial avenue in terms of studying responsibility. I had considered using the lens of gender in this study, given my lived experience and previous work related to women in leadership. However, with the breadth of responsible leadership as a topic, I narrowed my focus. My interest in conducting future research using a gendered lens is heightened by the significant discourse emerging in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic related to how women are seemingly leading more responsibly and successfully during this crisis than are men (Johnson & Williams, 2020;

Taub, 2020) and are seen to be more focused on the care of people (citizens and employees for example) and the privileging of life over the economy (Huang, 2020; Purkayashtha, Salvatore & Mukherjee, 2020).

Another area for research that emerges from the present study surrounds the topic of judgment as it relates to responsible decision-making. By developing a better understanding of the entanglement of judgment and responsibility, possibilities may emerge for supporting leaders in how to make more responsible decisions.

Opportunities arising from the present study for further inquiry appear endless, but the value of learning from experience related to responsible leadership is critical. Recognizing that a shift toward making more responsible decisions signifies much more than simply changing focus to a new style of leadership but requires a transformative change helps frame the challenge more clearly. As such, the more we can learn from those engaged in what participants call a journey, the more we will understand about what can influence and compel sustained focus on responsibility by individual leaders.

I discussed in Chapter Six the realization that our current day fixation with time emerges in the stories as an enemy or, at least, a barrier to responsible leadership and responsible decision-making. Privileged today are leaders who make quick, decisive decisions, deliver on short-term gains, and demonstrate a bias for action. This reality stands in contrast with the stories shared by participants who speak to needing to be deliberate and measured, taking the time to think and reflect, to pace and focus on the long-term. The magnitude of insights brought forward speak to needing time, taking time—more, not less time. The very concept of time seems now in conflict with conventional priorities, norms, and values. Studying the temporal aspects of

responsibility may shine light on not only challenges faced but the opportunity to reframe how change in mindset can be facilitated in the future.

### *Teaching Responsible Leadership*

Education emerges over and again as valuable in the journey of leaders who choose to pursue responsible leadership practices. Looking forward, an examination of syllabi for leadership programs could address questions around how and if the concept of responsibility is being taken up. Interviews with faculty in leadership programs across disciplines might be conducted to determine how professors think about responsibility as a distinct concept in leadership, and to identify possible strategies for engaging students in the complexity as well as the value of unpacking and exploring the subject. Research could include developing an understanding of the extent to which education on responsible leadership is transcending conceptual discussions and engaging in transformative learning.

As an educator teaching in higher education about responsibility in leadership, I conceptually see using the findings from the present study in the classroom. I imagine developing a curriculum which begins with students exploring today's context, recognizing through the literature and research how change at the individual level is only part of the long-term solution, and engaging in discussion about how making more responsible decisions represents making a transformative change in mindset. Next, I imagine shifting students toward critical self-reflection and reflexive engagement with others. In so doing, opportunities emerge to deepen and personalize learning. The insights shared by participants about getting prepared, being strategic, developing resiliency, defining personal priorities, and identifying lines and limits offer topics for exploration through a breadth of active learning pedagogies. What I propose next is not revolutionary, as these are practices that adult educators use today. Using

them artfully and with the objective of transforming decision-making to include consideration of responsible practices, educators could accomplish much with activities such as writing cases based on the stories shared in the present study; using the cases to enrich learning and promote discussion; developing role plays or simulations about being at the point of impingement; and, working through opportunities and facing (to some extent) the complexities participants face in real life. Involving guests willing to share their experience and address questions related to their journeys would also create valuable learning opportunities.

Drawing on how participants describe the criticality of support systems, continuous learning, and mindset, education and learning can be reimagined as constant companions on the journey. I turn to the number of participants who themselves chose to reengage in academia in order to explore alternatives to the status quo. While it is possible for individuals to travel this path alone, formal education is an avenue which can be supportive in helping leaders create knowledge, make choices, and stay resilient in the face of challenging experiences. It can also help develop and strengthen support systems, create networks, and create opportunities for mentorship, coaching, and providing safe spaces for leaders. Doing so offers the possibility of reconceptualizing education related to responsible leadership.

**Concluding Remarks**

There is no question that leadership, let alone responsible leadership, is a very complex concept influenced by multiple factors—from psychology to social context, for example. While there is an individual component to responsibility, it is heavily influenced by socio-economic and geo-political realities. For responsible leadership to become the norm, then, change is required at the individual, organizational, and societal level (Maak & Pless, 2006a; Voegtlin, 2017b). Given concerns about today's context which some say is leading to the rise of antidemocratic politics

and an "attack on society and social justice" (Brown, 2019, p. 13), some suggest that sustainable change toward truly responsible leadership may require rethinking capitalism itself (Annan, 2002; Kempster & Carroll, 2016).

The present study, while narrowly focused, fills gaps in scholarship, addresses the question of how leaders can come to be more responsible, and offers insights based on leaders' experiences in making decisions at the point of impingement. While the individual is only one part of the responsible leadership equation, it is an important one. Freeman and Auster (2011) highlight that engaging in activities such as developing self-understanding, querying the past, having conversations and building relationships, making connections with stakeholders, and articulating aspirations for ourselves and the effect we want to have more broadly, are critical in coming to understand values such as responsibility.

***On Romanticism and Realism***

Kempster and Carroll's (2016) call to study responsibility from within leadership sparked my interest in designing the present study. Their articulation of dimensions and questions which remain unaddressed around responsible leadership emerge in both the review of literature and in the analysis of findings. I had not imagined, however, when I began this work, that the findings would connect with the concepts highlighted in the title of their book, *Responsible Leadership: Realism and Romanticism.* The authors suggest that "change in practices of leadership that may address societal, ecological and humanitarian challenges" (p.13) requires a degree of romanticism alongside realism; it requires recognizing how today's context creates barriers and imposes limits. Romanticism injects the creativity, hope, and imagination needed to "find movement, novelty and aspiration in challenges that defy existing knowledge and expertise" (p.11) and create what the authors hope will be a better world.

Looking to the findings of the present study, I highlight the meaning participants make from their experiences. They speak to approaching responsibility as a journey, and something to work toward. They speak about humility and patience, and they reinforce that being responsible cannot be about external recognition or reward. They do not speak of being heroic, but of striving, failing, and learning. Their stories speak to challenges faced, but not of regret for having tried to do things differently. Leaders in the present study talk about learning to be content with the support of a few, and not requiring the accolades of the masses. Considering alternatives and options to conventional, problematic frames (Mezirow, 2006) is fundamental in transformative learning and we see participants in this work recognizing the implications of today's focus on immediate gratification, short term goal attainment, and the vision of ever-increasing growth and profit—for the few. While only Kempster and Carroll (2016) can address whether the meaning participants have made about their experience of trying to be responsible rises to what they imagine as romanticism, I find something compelling about a responsible future being built with care over time. Growing slowly like the oak tree, not shooting up quickly like a thicket of pine trees, I am reminded of the quote attributed to James Baillie writing about business and life in *Forbes Magazine* in 1954: "To grow and know what one is growing towards—that is the source of all strength and confidence in life." The metaphor, while poetic and inspirational to many, also highlights the risk for those choosing such a path in an era in which words like 'deathwatch' and 'plight' (Gross, 2016) are used to describe vanishing forests around the world.

### *Conclusion*

> We need responsible global leaders who are aware of the pressing problems in the world, care for the needs of others, aspire to make this world a better place, and act in word and deed as global and responsible citizens. (Maak & Pless, 2009, p. 537)

This work builds on scholarship, addresses gaps in literature and speaks to the possibility of transformation and change. Drawing on the metaphors of making critical connections and of common threads, I attempt here to stitch together the concepts of experience and responsibility by highlighting this reflection from John Dewey (1938), whose work is recognized as foundational to narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and to the field of education (Williams, 2017). In his seminal work, *Experience and Education*, Dewey calls upon those who recognize that the present affects the future to take on responsibility to improve the present in order to have "a favorable effect on the future" (p. 50). He highlights also that, as humans, what we learn "in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing with what situations follow" (p. 44). The insights gleaned from the stories of experience shared by research participants highlights how coming to understand their own relationship with responsibility has helped their practice. As they look to the future, they are informed by experience but recognize the recursive, reflexive and relational nature of being responsible and how every decision creates an opportunity to build their practice and learn from the consequences of their actions.

As adult learners I encourage leaders who wish to lead more responsibly to engage with the stories shared in this work, to engage with their own stories and the stories of other like-minded individuals in order be better prepared for the journey ahead. A journey that as participants tell us requires building strategic capacity, developing support systems and pursuing a continuous learning mindset fueled by humility and patience and a long-term perspective focused on not just self- and organizational-interests, but care for others including society (broadly conceptualized). This research informs the question of how leaders can come to make more responsible decisions while opening a myriad of new challenges and opportunities.

For educators of leaders, I offer this work for your consideration and to help you engage with students of all ages to explore with them concepts of agency and context, to have them dig deeply into their own understandings and experiences and to help them develop a path forward to navigate, negotiate and to stand firm on their non-negotiables. Change at all levels (micro, macro and meso) are need for systemic change, but as educators, scholars, and practitioners focussed on responsibility in leadership, we can take up the challenge of being more responsible leaders ourselves and helping others to do the same.

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Appendix A

**Responsibilities of Leadership—Dimensions (Propositions) and Questions**

| Proposition | Reference | Question |
|---|---|---|
| Attention and even commitment to social responsibility and the related field of CSR. | Waldman & Balven, 2014 | What assumptions have driven the definition and meaning of responsibility in the social responsibility and CSR fields? How do these confront, clash with, and extend responsibility in leadership? |
| Willing to assume multiple levels of responsibility (individual, team, department, organization and broadly socially). | Voegtlin, Patzer, & Scherer, 2012<br><br>Doh & Quigley, 2014 | What processes and practices are required to enact responsibility between people and groups with different power, position, and privilege? What paradoxes, insights, or mysteries arise when each of these levels becomes the focal point? |
| Seeks to go beyond a shareholder perspective to embrace a stakeholder perspective. | Maak & Pless, 2006<br><br>Waldman & Galvin, 2008 | What kind of leadership engages and mobilises parties with very different interests, agendas, and institutional narratives?<br><br>What assumptions, discourses, and histories shape the priorities given to competing stakeholders?<br><br>Why, how, and where does responsible leadership challenge/unsettle priorities? |
| Reliance on ethical assumptions to do no harm and do good; connected with notions of duty – duty of care, duty of assistance, and duty of justice. | Ciulla, 2006<br>Stahl & Sully de Luque, 2014<br><br>Maak & Pless, 2009 | What kind of relationship exists between leadership, responsibility, and ethics?<br><br>What kinds of questions, practices, and identities would help those in leadership hold the kind of conversations where competing ethical principles could be aired? |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | What assumptions, discourses, and histories have driven the notions of duty and ethics within organisations and how do they shape what it means to lead responsibly? |
| Tries to be sensitive to global inter-cultural sensitivity. Has a global citizen orientation. Notion of 'worldly' leadership and cosmopolitanism. | Miska, Stahl & Mendenhall, 2013<br><br>Maak & Pless, 2009<br><br>Turnbull, Case, Edwards, Schedlitzki & Simpson, 2011 | What tensions and paradoxes arise in a globalised world, and what does it mean to lead responsibly amid these?<br><br>How is leadership challenged by responsible global citizenship? What does it mean to lead in such a dispersed, diverse, and distributed context? |
| Pursues an out-come-orientation that addresses notions of the triple bottom line and a humanitarian perspective. | Elkington, 1997<br><br>Maak & Pless 2009 | What tensions, conflicts, and paradoxes do corporates particularly encounter when they attempt to 'balance' financial, environmental, social, and humanitarian possibilities? |
| Engages with processes of sensemaking and sense giving strongly linked with questions of purpose. | Kempster, Jackson, & Conroy, 2011 | If responsibility emerges between people, through interactions, how can what it means to be responsible be co-created?<br><br>What is the role of purpose in sustaining, driving, and connecting responsible leadership across time and boundaries? |
| Responsible leadership implies a shared orientation; a collaborative and relational approach to leading that | Pearce, Wassenaar, & Manz, 2014<br><br>Fairhurst & | Why does responsible leadership imply a shared orientation?<br><br>What are the limits and blind spots when approaching it with an individual orientation? |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| connects stakeholders together. | Connaughton, 2014<br><br>Maak & Pless, 2006b<br><br>Pless, Maak & Waldman, 2012 | What is opened by bringing the collective into the picture of responsible leadership? |
| Responsibility embraces notions of the use of resources: notably material, human, and financial | Orlitzky, Schmidt & Rynes, 2003<br><br>Voegtlin, 2015 | What types of spaces, artefacts, discourses, and technologies facilitate responsible leadership and how do they do so?<br><br>What assumptions, discourses, and histories enable/constrain use of resources, where do these need to be disrupted and what might that look like? |
| Focus on shareholder value has been historically short-term, while stakeholder value is seen over the long-term. | Waldman & Galvin, 2008 | How do collectives work between short term, immediate and long term or more distant responsibilities?<br><br>What tensions, conflicts, and processes mediate between these different levels of responsibilities? |

*Note:* Adapted from Kempster and Carroll (2016) by Kanina Blanchard. The authors offer ten propositions (dimensions) alongside ten questions they recognize will shape the development of responsible leadership.

## Appendix B

## Letter of Information and Consent (5 pages)

¶
¶
**Project·Title:·¶**
Is·Responsible·Leadership·Possible?·A·Narrative·Inquiry·in·the·Experiences·of·Business·Leaders,·Educators·and·Scholars¶
¶
**Document·Title:¶**
Letter·of·Information·and·Consent:··Letter·of·Information·¶
¶
**Principal·Investigator·&·Contact·Information¶**
[redacted]
¶
**Additional·Contact¶**
[redacted]
¶
**Invitation·to·Participate¶**

- You·are·being·invited·to·participate·in·this·research·study·because·of·your·role·as·a·leader·in·the·field·of·responsible·leadership.··The·study·is·designed·to·better·understand·the·experiences·of·leaders·as·they·consider·societal·interests·along·with·economic·priorities·in·professional·decision-making.·¶
- ¶
- This·study·seeks·to·contribute·to·the·Responsible·Leadership·framework·and·the·practice·of·responsible·leadership.··Specifically,·the·study·explores·how·leaders·like·yourself·describe·the·dilemmas·which·emerge·as·you·consider·integrating·the·needs·and·expectations·of·society·with·economic·priorities·into·professional·decision-making.··It·also·seeks·to·explore·your·stories·of·negotiating·the·tensions·you·face.·The·insights·that·emerge·will·inform·efforts·to·develop·transformative·education·and·learning·in·support·of·responsible·leadership.··¶

¶
**Why·is·this·study·being·done?¶**
The·importance·of·leaders·being·responsible·has·become·an·ubiquitous·topic·in·journals,·the·media·and·in·the·work·of·academics·and·scholars.··One·of·the·tenants·of·"being"·responsible·is·around·making·decisions·which·consider·societal·interests·(broadly·conceptualized)·along·with·economic·priorities.·While·the·concept·has·captured·the·attention·of·many,·the·challenges·for·leaders·to·actually·do·so·are·not·fully·understood.¶
¶
**How·long·will·you·be·in·this·study?·¶**
If·you·agree·to·participate,·you·will·be·asked·to·participate·in·two·or·three·3·audio-recorded·interviews·(45-60·min).··The·interviews·will·be·conducted·in·person,·via·Skype·or·by·phone.·The·interviews·will·be·conducted·between·February·2019·and·August·2019.··¶
You·will·be·given·the·opportunity·to·both·review·the·interview·transcripts,·which·could·take·about·30·minutes.·Transcripts·will·be·made·available·for·your·review.·¶
¶
¶


¶

**What are the study procedures?**¶

I look forward to engaging in two or three 45-60-minute interviews over a six-month period. I will provide you with a transcript of each interview for your review. I will also share with you the narratives I write based on your stories. Participants are encouraged to ask questions at any time. Participation is completely voluntary. Your information will be kept confidential, and the study will not specifically identify participants or their organizations. Participants can opt to leave the study at any time. ¶

¶

**What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?**¶

There are no known anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study. ¶

¶

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**¶

There are both personal and societal possible benefits to participation in the study. Possible personal benefits include the opportunity to reflect on your experiences and potentially inform current or future leader development/education practices. At the societal level, contributing toward the development/education of more responsible leaders is not only a value to society, but an imperative.¶

¶

**Can participants choose to leave the study?**¶

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request (in writing via email or phone) withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher (Kanina Blanchard) know and all traces of your information will be destroyed from our record. Note: Once the study is published, we will not be able to withdraw your information from already published work.¶

¶

**How will participant's information be kept confidential?**

All possible efforts to protect your information will be taken and are outlined here. First of all, only the Principal Investigator (Dr. Melody Viczko) and researcher (Kanina Blanchard) will have access to the data and information collected. Secondly, while correspondence will take place over email, no research-related materials such as transcripts or the signed consent letter will be exchanged using email. A secure, password protected location will be used to transfer such materials. The researcher will keep any personal/identifiable information about participants in a secure and confidential location for seven years (according to Western's policies). A minimum of identifiable information will be collected (name, phone, email). A unique pseudonym will be assigned to each participant and the list linking pseudonyms to identifiable information will be kept separate from the study file. The researcher will personally transcribe the interviews and participants will have the opportunity to review their own for accuracy. Quotations will be used extensively in the report but identifiable information will not be attributed to the quote. Participants will not be named in any reports, publications, or presentations that may come from this study. While no guarantees can be made, best practices, guidelines and regulations will be followed. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research ¶

¶

Western Education

¶

Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. However, your data will remain confidential.¶

→ ¶

**Are participants compensated to be in this study?**¶

You will not be compensated for participation in this research.¶

→ → ¶

**What are the rights of participants?**¶

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. If you chose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on you academic standing (if applicable). You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form. A copy of the study will be provided to participants upon request.¶

¶

**Whom do participants contact for questions?**¶

If you have questions about this research, please contact [redacted]

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics (519) 661-3036, 1-844-720-9816, email: ethics@uwo.ca. The REB is a group of people who oversee the ethical conduct of research studies. They are not part of the study team so everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.¶

¶

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**¶

Page Break¶


**Letter of Consent (Written Script)**

**Project Title:**
Is Responsible Leadership Possible? A Narrative Inquiry in the Experiences of Scholars, Educators and Business Leaders

**Document Title:**
Letter of Information and Consent: Written Consent Document (RGL Professors/CEMS)

**Principal Investigator & Contact Information**

[redacted]

**Additional Contact**

[redacted]

**Written Consent**
**(To Be Signed/Provided Prior to Interview)**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction. By competing and signing this document, I agree to participate in the semi-structured interview explained in the Letter of Information.

I agree to be audio-recorded in this research
☐ YES

I consent to the use of unidentified/unattributed quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research
☐ YES ☐ NO

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Participant's Name (Last)** | **Participant's Name (First)** | Date *(DD-MMM-YYYY)* |

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Participant's Name (Last)** | | |

[redacted]

Western Education

→ → → → → ·····¶

¶

**Letter·of·Consent·(Verbal··Script)**¶

¶

**Project·Title:**¶

Is·Responsible·Leadership·Possible?·A·Narrative·Inquiry·in·the·Experiences·of·Scholars,·Educators·and·Business·Leaders¶

¶

**Document·Title:**¶

Letter·of·Information·and·Consent:··Verbal·Consent·Document·(RGL·Professors/CEMS)¶

¶

**Principal·Investigator·&·Contact·Information**¶

[redacted]

¶

**Additional·Contact**¶

[redacted]

·¶

**Verbal·Consent·Script**¶
**(Completed·by·the·Research·and·Participant·Verbally·Before·Phone/Skype·Interview)·if·written·consent·not·returned).**¶

¶

Thank·you·for·agreeing·to·participate·in·this·study.··As·we·don't·have·a·signed·written·consent·form·on-hand·and·you·have·indicated·interest·to·continue·forward·with·the·interview,·I·would·like·to·ensure·your·consent·by·reviewing,·and·asking·you·to·respond·to·the·following·questions·verbally.··I·will·document·and·record·(audio)·your·responses·and·follow·the·confidentiality·commitment·outlined·in·the·Letter·of·Information.¶

¶

1.→ I·have·read·the·Letter·of·Information,·have·had·the·nature·of·the·study·explained·to·me·and·I·agree·to·participate.·All·questions·have·been·answered·to·my·satisfaction.··I·agree·to·participate·in·the·semi-structured·interview·explained·in·the·Letter·of·Information.··¶

☐·**YES**·☐·**NO**¶

¶

2.→ I·agree·to·be·audio-recorded·in·this·research¶

☐·**YES**·¶

¶

3.→ I·consent·to·the·use·of·unidentified/unattributed·quotes·obtained·during·the·study·in·the·dissemination·of·this·research·¶

☐·**YES**·☐·**NO**¶

¶

## Appendix C

## Interview Guide (3 pages)

¶
¶
**Project Title:** ¶
Is Responsible Leadership Possible? A Narrative Inquiry in the Experiences of Business Leaders, Educators and Scholars¶
¶
**Document Title:**¶
Interview Guide¶
¶
**Principal Investigator & Contact Information**¶

[redacted]

¶
**Additional Contact**¶

[redacted]

¶
**Interview Guide (for use by researcher only):**¶
¶
**Guiding This Narrative Inquiry Is:**¶
¶
1. The main research question/query/interest which is, how can leaders can come to be more responsible in their decision-making?¶
2. Curiosities which include:¶
   a) How do participants come to understand responsibility in leadership?¶
   b) How do the stories shed light on challenges associated with responsible decision-making?¶
   c) How do stories elucidate approaches participants take to address the challenges?¶
   d) How have participants interpreted their experiences? Identified learnings and made-meaning?¶

**Preliminary Discussion Questions:**¶
¶
1. How do you understand the concept of responsibility as it relates to leadership? What does being responsible mean to you?¶
2. Can you tell me about how you became interested in being responsible?¶
   - *Prompts may include: Reflections, discussions, experiences, situation you faced?*¶

¶
**Experience Focused Questions**¶
1. Let's shift to your lived experiences and stories you can share about trying to be¶

**Story #1**¶
1. What challenges emerged in the first story? What challenges (dilemmas and tensions) did you face?¶
   - Describe the challenges?¶
   - How did they emerge? When?¶

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- Did they get worse or better? Why?
- Did individuals or groups influence? Who? Why?
- What happened next?

2. How did you deal with the challenges/situation initially?
   - How did you approach up front?
   - What was going through your mind?
   - What did you think when it started?
3. As the situation continued how did you work through the challenges (tensions)?
   - How did you approach the developing situation?
   - Did you change your approach? Why? Why not?
   - Who got involved? Why?
   - How did you navigate, negotiate, work through them?
     - *Prompts: How did you feel? What helped you (community, culture, education, family, religion, past experience? Was there a person or people who you turned to? Who? Why?*
4. Was there a "turning" point of some kind that you remember?
   - Something that changed, became apparent?
   - What happened? Why?
   - Who was involved? Why?
   - Describe evolution?
     - *Prompts: Were you surprised? In a good way or not? How did you feel?*
5. What happened in the end?
   - What decision did you make? Why?
   - How did you feel at the time?
   - Upon reflection how do you feel?
   - Looking back, what did you learn?
   - What might you do differently if there was a time machine? Why?
   - What would you say to yourself now? What do you wish you had said then?
   - What have you learned

REPEAT through stories

---

NOTES FOR RESEARCHER (to address participant questions and to guide):

Narrative Inquiry Explained:

- The interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analyzing stories of life experiences (e.g., life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies) and reporting that kind of research.
- A means by which we systematically gather, analyse, and represent people's stories as told by them, which challenges traditional and modernist views of truth, reality, knowledge and personhood, (Etherington, 2013, p.2).
- Study of an individual's experience in the world and through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others, (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2006, p.42).


¶

**Structure of Study**¶

1. Introduction:¶
   - Problem: leaders continue to make "irresponsible decisions" that privilege economic priorities/harm society ¶
   - Questions: see above¶
2. Research procedures: (a narrative, significance of individual, data collection, analysis outcomes)¶
3. Report of stories¶
4. Individuals theorize about their experiences¶
5. Narrative segments identified¶
6. Patterns of meaning identified (events, processes, epiphanies, themes)¶
7. Summary (Adapted from Denzin, 1989a, 1989b)¶

¶

**TIPS:**¶

Inspired by Dewey, narrative scholars contend that people shape their daily lives by stories. ¶

- 'Tell me about the/a time when'.... rather than 'tell me about your experience of'...¶
- 'Who else was involved?'¶
- 'How long did that go on for?'¶
- 'When did you realise that it couldn't go on?'¶
- 'What kind of sense did you make of all that?' ..... Etherington, 2013, p.42-48¶

¶

**Types of Narrative Questions** → → → → Shapiro & Ross, 2002¶

¶

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| DECONSTRUCTIVE → | Show how stories are constructed; situate narratives in larger systems¶ | *Who told you*¶ |
| RENAMING → | Support efficacy by sharing authorship → | *What would you call this problem?*¶ |
| PERSPECTIVE → | Explore other people's views of patient → | *Does everyone agree that...*¶ |
| OPENING SPACE → | Allow hopeful thoughts, actions to surface and be explored; highlight patient efficacy regarding problem → | *Tell me about these.*¶ |
| HYPOTHETICAL → | Stimulate imagination to envision different, → | *Suppose the unexpected*¶ |
| PREFERENCE → | Check to make sure that exceptional moments are preferred to the problem story; → | *How did you feel when you....*¶ |
| STORY DEVELOPMENT → | Explore and linger on elements of the preferred story → | *Tell me more about how you were able to.... What happened?*¶ |
| REDESCRIPTION → | Help participant recognize preferred qualities in themselves → | *What does it say about you, the situation, etc.*¶ |
| BIFURCATION → | Encourage them to align him/herself against the problem → | *Is the event you're describing...*¶ |
| STOPPER → | Refocus when he/she seems to be getting stuck → | *Which story are you telling now?*¶ |
| AUDIENCE → | Identify supportive witnesses to the new or developing story → ¶ | *Who would be....*¶ |

¶

# Appendix D

## Ethics Form of Approval

Western Research

**Date:** 1 February 2019

**To:** Dr. Melody Viczko

**Project ID:** 112354

**Study Title:** Is Responsible Leadership Possible? A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Business Leaders, Educators and Scholars

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** March 1 2019

**Date Approval Issued:** 01/Feb/2019

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 01/Feb/2020

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Dear Dr. Melody Viczko

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

**Documents Approved:**

| Document Name | Document Type | Document Date | Document Version |
|---|---|---|---|
| Blanchard_112354 _End of Study Letter_091218 | End of Study Letter | 09/Dec/2018 | 1 |
| Blanchard_112354 _Semi-Structured Interview Guide_091218 | Interview Guide | 09/Dec/2018 | 1 |
| Blanchard_112354 _V2 Initial Outreach to Educators-Scholars_130119 | Recruitment Materials | 13/Jan/2019 | 2 |
| Blanchard_112354 _V2_Recruitment Email to IMC Members_130119 | Recruitment Materials | 13/Jan/2019 | 2 |
| Blanchard_112354_Gentle Reminder Email_091218 | Recruitment Materials | 09/Dec/2018 | 1 |
| Blanchard_PhD 112354_V2 Initial Outreach Script to IMC (Organization)_130119 | Recruitment Materials | 13/Jan/2019 | 2 |
| Blanchard_PhD 112354_V2 Intro Letter and Consent_130119 | Verbal Consent/Assent | 13/Jan/2019 | 2 |
| Blanchard_PhD 112354_V2 Intro Letter and Consent_130119 | Written Consent/Assent | 13/Jan/2019 | 2 |

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Appendix E

## Curriculum Vitae

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** | 2016-2020 | PhD candidate, Faculty of Education, CPELS<br>Western University, London, ON, Canada |
| | 2016 | Master's Degree, Education, CPELS<br>Western University, London, ON, Canada |
| | 1989 | Honours Bachelors, Journalism w/ Sociology<br>Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, Canada |
| **Related Work Experience** | 2019-Present | Lecturer (3-year contract)<br>Communications, Global Management, Leadership<br>Ivey Business School<br>Western University, London, ON, Canada |
| | 2016-2019 | Lecturer (1-year contracts/part time)<br>Communications, Global Management, Leadership<br>Ivey Business School<br>Western University, London, ON, Canada |
| | 2016-2019 | Executive in Residence<br>Ian O. Ihnatowycz Institute for Leadership<br>Ivey Business School<br>Western University, London, ON, Canada |
| | 2015-2019 | Research Assistant, Faculty of Education<br>Western University, London, ON, Canada |
| | 2012 | Leaders under Fire Course Developer and Lecturer<br>Ivey School of Business<br>Western University, London, ON, Canada |
| | 2010-2019 | Guest lecturer, Case Competition Judge, Mentor<br>Ian O. Ihnatowycz Institute for Leadership<br>Ivey Business School<br>Western University, London, ON, Canada. |
| **Executive Education** | The Prince of Wales's, Business & Sustainability Programme, California, USA<br><br>International Institute for Management Development (IMD) Lausanne, Switzerland<br><br>Thunderbird School of Global Management, Phoenix, Arizona, USA | |

**Peer Reviewed:**

Blanchard, K. (2019, Oct.) *Developing Leader Character: Character Infused Communication*. Presentation presented at the 21st annual ILA (International Leadership Association) global conference. Ottawa, Ontario, CA.

Blanchard, K. (2017, May). *Opening Doors for Dialogue: Gender Matters to Students of Leadership in Higher Education*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, Congress, Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Toronto, ON.

Blanchard, K. (2016, Sept.) *Improving Leadership Education*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Consortium for the Study of Leadership and Ethics in Education (CSLEE) 21st Conference, London, ON.

Blanchard, K. (2016, June). *Improving Leadership Education*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, Congress, Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Calgary, AB.

**Recent Publications:**

| | |
|---|---|
| 2020 (pending) | "Breaking the Silence"<br>Ivey Publishing #TBD |
| 2017 | "Working Internationally: Forget 'Business as Usual'<br>Ivey Publishing #9B17C013 |
| 2015 | "Sophia Tannis: Life Choices<br>Ivey Publishing #9B15M101/102 |
| 2013 | "Michael Boulos. A Career Derailed Case Study"<br>Ivey Publishing #9B14C053 |
| 2012 | "Sophia Tannis: The European Transfer"<br>Ivey Publishing #9B13C027 |

**Published in:**

| | |
|---|---|
| 2017 | Impact: A Guide to Business Communication, 9th Ed.<br>January |
| 2015 | Harvard Business Review: The Experts Respond<br>July/August 2015 |
| 2012 | Ivey Business Journal: To a better understanding |

| | |
|---|---|
| | March-April 2012 |
| 2011 | Business Horizons: Getting ready to lead.<br>Vol. 54(5) 407-413 |

**Awards:**

| | |
|---|---|
| 2016 | CASEA Margaret Haughey Master's Award.<br>Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration |
| 2016-2019 | PhD Scholarship, Faculty of Education<br>Western University, London, ON, Canada |
| 2014-2016 | Masters Scholarship, Faculty of Education<br>Western University, London, ON, Canada |

**Memberships and Affiliations**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2016-present | CASEA | Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration CASEA |
| 2015-present | CSSE | Canadian Society for the Study of Education |
| | CSSHE | Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education |
| | CMC | Canadian Institute of Management Consulting (CMC accredited) |
| 1989-present | IABC | International Association of Business Communicators |

**Conferences and Symposiums**

| | |
|---|---|
| 2019 | International Leadership Association Conference. Ottawa, ON. Presenter and Participant |
| 2018 | Values and Leadership Conference, Ivey Business School, Toronto, ON, Participant |
| 2017 | Congress, Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Toronto, ON, Participant |
| 2016 | Values and Leadership Conference, Ivey Business School, London, ON, Participant |
| 2016 | Values Conference, Faculty of Education, London, ON. Presenter and Participant |

2016 Congress, Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Calgary, AB. Presenter and Participant

**Work Experience**

2009-present President, Opportunity Creation

2013-2014 Executive Director, Fowler Kennedy Sport Medicine Clinic, London, ON, Canada

2012-2013 Regional Director, Ministry of the Environment, London, ON, Canada

2009-2012 Manager and Executive Leader, Ministry of the Environment, London, ON, Canada

1989-2009 The Dow Chemical Company

- 2006-2009 Global Director of Issues Management, Midland, Michigan, USA.
- 2002-2006 Global Director of Public Affairs and Public Policy, Hydrocarbons & Energy. Horgen, Switzerland. Lobbyist, Brussels, Belgium.
- 2004-2006 Public Affairs and Public Policy Director, Europe. Horgen, Switzerland.
- 2000-2002 Public Affairs and Public Policy Leader, Texas Operations, USA.
- 1995-2000 Global Web and E-Commerce leader, Midland, Michigan, USA.
- 1993-1995 Global Employee Communications leader, Midland, Michigan, USA and Hong Kong.
- 1989-1992 Public Affairs and Public Policy roles in Canada & U.S.